

ACCENTS OF RUSSIAN IN PERFORMATIVE USE: ETHNIC STYLES, LANGUAGE ATTITUDES, AND IDENTITIES OF YOUNG NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS

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Abstract. The paper deals with the performative use of different ethnic accents by young multilingual speakers of Russian. It aims at revealing the ways ethnic accents are used to challenge existing monolingual bias and reclaim agency opposing ethnic and linguistic prejudices. The study is based on an analysis of videos representing and discussing different non-native accents of Russian, created both by professional comedians and by amateurs and published on YouTube and TikTok. Metadata and comments on the videos expressing attitudes towards the performance of accents and linguistic stereotypes were also included in the analysis to reveal typical audience reactions.

Keywords: youth multilingualism, language ideology, ethnic identity, Russian, migration, comedy, vlogs

1. Introduction

As a result of mass migration to Russia from the former Soviet republics during the 1990s–2010s, linguistic diversity of the country has been on the rise, with languages other than Russian becoming more visible. Unlike in the Soviet Union in the 1960s–1980s and even in the early 1990s in Russia, when newcomers from, e.g. Uzbekistan or Georgia could speak Russian fluently after many years of studying

it in schools, nowadays, most migrants have no or very limited knowledge of Russian upon arrival. Internal migration to populous Russian cities from Russia's national republics with a high level of multilingualism is also significant; therefore, there is an increasing number of non-native speakers of Russian, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg. However, despite being de facto multilingual, Russian cities tend to keep a 'monolingual façade' (Baranova, Fedorova 2019: 26): Russian totally dominates urban linguistic landscapes, and using languages other than Russian is usually not welcome in public spaces (Baranova, Fedorova 2019, 2020). Moreover, non-native accents and perceived imperfections in Russian are also treated with suspicion and provoke ethnic and linguistic prejudices.

In our previous research focused on Russian native speakers' linguistic prejudices and language attitudes (Baranova, Fedorova 2020), we discovered many cases of overtly expressed intolerance towards both other languages and accented Russian. There is also evidence that people often do not distinguish between different 'non-European' accents of Russian, merging, e.g. Armenian, Georgian, Tajik or even Chinese ones into an overgeneralised category of 'Eastern' (= 'Asian') accent (Panova 2012). Traditionally, in Russian ethnic jokes only a few accents, or ethnic styles of speaking (Ukrainians, Jews, Estonians, Georgians, and Chukchi) were represented (Shmeleva, Shmelev 2002, ch. 3). This oversimplified discriminatory discourse is still powerful among the Russian-speaking majority, and ethnic stereotypes and derogatory depictions of non-native speakers are widely represented in popular culture. However, with the development of the internet and social media, access to representation became easier for everyone, including non-native speakers of Russian, both newcomers and locals, i.e. the native citizens of national republics and the second generation of migrants. Nowadays, as we will try to show, they can become popular not only despite their accents but also due to them, by using them creatively in the web-space.

This paper aims to analyse approaches to linguistic diversity from the perspective of young people living in Russia and speaking with different accents. It emphasises the empowerment of speakers and their resistance to linguistic prejudices of the Russian-speaking majority. It is based on the study of data from professional videos (sketch and stand-up shows) and non-professional vlogs created by young non-native speakers of Russian who aim at performative use of different accents and ethnic styles of speaking. It should be noted that the field is heterogeneous: the Russian stand-up scene consists of actors who prefer to engage in TV-shows and the independent network of cooperation among co-performances (Gavrilov 2022). Both the speech of video bloggers and audience comments are analysed to reveal different types of discourses on multilingualism.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section discusses theoretical approaches towards non-native accents and their use as a part of creative practices and cultural industry; it also introduces the data and research methodology. Section 3 deals with stand-up comedy and comedic sketches employing ethnic jokes and non-native accents. Section 4 analyses videos created by non-native speakers of Russian as a form of their representation of everyday linguistic practices and distinctive features of different ethnic styles of speaking. The concluding section discusses the research results.

2. Theoretical background and research methodology

The ethnical way of speaking is often referred to as an ‘ethnolect’. Since Labov’s seminal works on AAVE (Labov 1972) and studies on Yiddish (Verschik 2007), or the speech of Turkish 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 speakers. More recent studies have emphasised the inadequate explanatory power of the term ‘ethnolect’, ethnicisation 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, p. 79). Here we prefer to avoid the term 'ethnolect' and focus on phonological transfer from various languages to Russian among non-native speakers. Kern (2011, p. 5) analyses new linguistic practices among adolescents from the second generation of migrants and calls them 'ethnic styles of speaking', emphasising the variability and linguistic resources that are available to the speakers. Benor (2010) also highlights the idea of multiple resources that make speech more or less 'ethnic' and can be used consciously to express one's identity. Thus, the issues of speakers' intentionality and identity are highly relevant for the studies in the field of ethnic styles.

As Rampton (1995) shows, groups may use new linguistic variants. Hybrid language forms or pronouncing words with a deliberate and exaggerated accent can be aimed at resisting ethnic prejudice, emphasising one's origin. This strategy can be seen in adolescents speaking English-based creoles. The sequence of adaptation includes the first generation of migrants who used Creole as the only resource available to them in their daily communication with native English speakers and the second generation who can speak English fluently and uses the pronunciation with an accent as a creative practice, as a marker of their identity, or for the sake of the elder generation. In another context, adolescents deliberately use the 'wrong' version of the article indicating the gender, reproducing the 'ethnic' version of Dutch (Cornips 2008, p. 119). Linguistic varieties associated with certain ethnic styles, therefore, can be used for claiming one's identity, for expressing solidarity with a group or for contrasting with some other groups (Blackledge, Creese 2015).

The representation of ethnic styles of speaking and accents in the media, for example, in TV comedy shows and stand-up performances, takes different forms; another important issue is the distinction between internal and external usage of some linguistic features to perform accents. By external usage we mean employment of those features by speakers normally not using them in their everyday speech and not belonging to the speech community associated

with them. For example, in Germany, *Kanakcomedy* ('*Kanake*' is a derogatory, racist term for Turkish immigrants) is a stereotyped parody of *Kiezdeutsch*, created by people without Turkish background; however, some artists of Turkish origin, like *Fatih Akin*, tend to reproduce a more natural way of speaking; the use of the variety in hip-hop turned it into a literary medium (Loentz 2006, p. 39). Linguistic stereotypes and derogatory terms, therefore, can be reclaimed and used creatively, which provides an opportunity for empowerment for linguistic minorities. A performance gives comedians an opportunity to go beyond conventions and existing social relations (Da Silva 2015: 206).

Young speakers identifying themselves ethnically and / or linguistically are becoming more visible in the comic scene than before. Digitalisation of communication and the opportunities provided by social media can further promote diversification of accents and styles among young speakers. Analysing Israeli humorous emails, *Boxman-Shabtai* and *Shifman* (2015) state that moving onto online ethnic humour transforms it significantly, especially in terms of locality. The growing influence and popularity of live (streaming) video from popular platforms such as YouTube and TikTok decrease barriers to inclusion in the comic industry. At the same time, interaction with the audience becomes easier as anyone can watch a video, post a comment and even interact with a performer. For researchers, this means the emergence of a new kind of data on youth multilingualism and language attitudes.

For the purpose of this study, we have chosen videos representing and discussing different non-native accents of Russian, created both by professional comedians (14 videos) and by amateurs (22 videos) and published on YouTube and TikTok. These videos were analysed to reveal particular linguistic features ascribed to different ethnic accents, ethnic and linguistic categories used by the speakers, and performative strategies and techniques employed by them. The second source of data was comments on the YouTube videos published by the viewers. Regarding videos that had prompted

a considerable number of comments, only the first 300 most recent and popular ones were collected, whereas all comments of a video were considered if they were fewer than 300. From these texts, we selected those expressing attitudes towards the performance of accents and linguistic stereotypes and used them to reveal typical audience reactions.

3. The performative use of non-native accents by professional comedians

The depiction of non-native accents for comic purposes was a rather marginal phenomenon in Soviet comedy. In popular films, there were only a few characters from the Caucasus and Central Asia speaking with certain phonetic and grammatical features. Among the most popular of them were Vasilii Alibabaevich from some unspecified Central Asian republic (Alexandr Seryi's film *Gentlemen of fortune*) and Valiko from Georgia and Ruben from Armenia (Georgii Daneliia's film *Mimino*). Exaggerated accents, ungrammatical phrases and literal translations from other languages were aimed at creating a comic effect and exploiting the image of the Other (see, e.g. Andronikashvili 2015, p. 543). Some of those heavily accented lines became catch phrases known to most Soviet and even many post-Soviet Russian speakers. The famous Soviet comedian Arkadii Raikin also employed an unspecified 'Caucasian' or 'Central Asian' accent in some of his performances.

The same tendency to create stereotypical images of several ethnic groups by employing overgeneralized non-native accents was found in official comedian shows on Russian television throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Aimed at native Russian speakers, shows like *КВН (Клуб веселых и находчивых* 'Club of the Funny and Inventive') and *Comedy Club* would not normally try to represent accents realistically and make a distinction between different types of accents. The most obvious example is the *Наша Россия* 'Our Russia' show (on air in 2006–2011), which depicted certain stereotypical

characters. Labour migrants from Tajikistan were represented by the comic figures ‘Rafshan’ and ‘Dzhamshud’, performed, respectively, by Mikhail Galustyan (Armenian) and Valerii Magdjash (Moldovan). When speaking ‘Tajik’, they pronounced gibberish words and syllables which are neither Tajik nor any other language, but which resemble the way Russian speakers usually imitate the speech of foreigners ‘from the East’, for example, using partial reduplication: *ахалай-махалай, ишгермек-бишгермек* (cf. typical ‘Turkic’ pattern of reduplication with changing the first consonant [Stolz 2008]). When speaking in Russian, the actors reproduce various stereotypes of ‘non-European’ accents which have very little in common with the speech produced by native Tajik speakers when speaking Russian. In particular, they add vowels after final consonants, thus turning closed syllables into open ones: *нащальника* instead of *начальник* ‘boss’. This feature is typical for native speakers of languages such as Chinese, where there is only a limited number of syllable final consonants, and which therefore is widespread in the speech of native speakers of Mandarin who have immigrated into Russia, have no formal tuition in Russian, and whose Sino-Russian idiolect features mainly Russian vocabulary (Frajzyngier *et al.* 2021); the same is true for a replacement of affricates by sibilants. Tajik speakers, on the contrary, have no reason to pronounce Russian words this way. Moreover, Rafshan’s and Dzhamshud’s speech lack the opposition between voiced and voiceless consonants: *каварил* instead of *говорил* ‘said’, which is, again, not typical for Tajik speakers. The show was very popular in Russia, and the names of Rafshan and Dzhamshud are still used by many people, even journalists, as a derogatory term to refer to labour migrants from Central Asia. Thus, for example, a news article informing about a proposed decree demanding migrants to sign a ‘loyalty agreement’ when entering Russia, is titled *Равшан и Джамшут пообещают больше не грабить и не насильничать?* ‘So Rafshan and Dzhamshud will promise not to rob and rape anymore?’ Unsurprisingly, the show was heavily criticised as racist and xenophobic by people from

Tajikistan and other countries as well as in the national republics within Russia. There were even official protests and attempts to stop the screening of the show and its consecutive film *Яйца судьбы* 'The balls of fate' by Tajik officials,¹ and rumours still circulate online that the actors had been threatened or even physically abused by some representatives of the Tajik diaspora.

Further development of stand-up comedy in Russia through various reality shows and competitions, alongside with the fast growth of social media, first of all YouTube, resulted in the emergence of new comedians who have begun to integrate their origins and accents into their performance personae. In most cases, they can speak Russian with just a slight accent, or even without it (as they sometimes are native speakers of Russian or early bilinguals), but they 'turn on' an accent as a performative tool. Rasul Chabdarov, a Balkar stand-up comedian from Nalchik, turns his accent into a weapon to attack xenophobic Russian speakers. In the following example, he describes a conversation with a taxi driver who complains about non-Russian drivers and their poor driving skills: *Они у себя в аулах на баранах ездят!* 'They ride sheep in their auls [a word of Turkic origin referring to villages in the Caucasus]!' The character replies with a strong accent and in an extremely high-pitched voice, typical for a stereotypical 'Caucasian': *На баранах?!* 'Sheep?' and then addresses the audience in a less accented tone: *Всю жизнь же на ишаках было, блядь!* 'For their entire life, they were donkeys, for fuck's sake!'. Indeed, popular xenophobic phrases about people from the Caucasus and Central Asia usually mention donkeys as their means of transportation. By addressing the issues of racism and xenophobia, Chabdarov 'turns the table' and transforms himself and his fellow 'non-Russians' from an object of mockery into a mocking subject, thus reclaiming his agentivity. The exaggerated accent he suddenly employs signals this turning point as if he were saying 'at least get your racist stereotypes right'. In his numerous jokes about the way

¹ <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/128901> (May 31, 2022).

Russians see other ethnicities, he reclaims his accent and style of speaking the same way he reclaims the image of the ‘savage from the aul’ by telling risqué jokes about sex with sheep. When talking about Russian speakers depicting a ‘Caucasian accent’, he states:

Вы не умеете, вы все время кого-то одного и того же грузина пародируете, че за расизм? Мы же блядь не азиаты!

You can’t do it, all the time you make parodies of the same one Georgian guy, that’s racism, ye? We are not fucking Asians!

The final racist slur can be either an unintentional expression of the speaker’s feeling of superiority towards Asian people, or something more subtle – a conscious attempt to keep the mask and further problematize racism. This second interpretation is supported by the context. First, Chabdarov, apart from performing under his own name, published a video of himself performing as a native Russian speaker named Alexandr Lurje.² In this video, staged at a club, the depicted audience is part of the show. The performer spent almost 30 minutes telling banalities, racist and homophobic jokes and complaining about the downfall of the Russian people to the applause of his listeners; after that he was shot to death by a ‘non-Russian’ and taken from the scene. This symbolic killing of the speaker during his performance reframes it and turns the mocking subject into an object of mockery. Second, when attacking the racism of Russians while performing as his ‘ethnic’ personality, he opposes to them all ‘non-Russians’ or ‘Easterners’, including not only people from the Caucasus but also, e.g. Tajiks. Moreover, he put in the same group both Russian citizens (Balkars, Chechens, Dagestanis) and foreigners (Georgians and Armenians), e.g. when he talks about what Caucasians would do in Hollywood—the Armenian would be Tony Stark (‘Iron Man’) and the Dagestani would be Spider-Man). He repeatedly opposes ‘us’ and ‘you’ (i.e. native Russian speakers):

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uh2q890GCrQ> (May 31, 2022).

Вы на нас срываете все негативные эмоции

‘You vent all your negative emotions on us’

Мы начинаем перед вами понтоваться нашими обычаями

‘We begin to show off our customs in front of you’

Вам нравится экзотика, а мы вам даем эту экзотику, еще и утрируем

‘You like exotic, and we give you this exotic, and we also exaggerate.’

On the other hand, Chabdarov demonstrates different accents and ‘teaches’ his, mostly native Russian-speaking, audience to depict different accents: Armenian, Chechen, Dagestani, etc.³ Thus, he simultaneously deconstructs the stereotype of ‘Easterners’, a homogeneous group of non-Europeans speaking Russian with one and the same ‘funny accent’ and contributes, at the same time, to it by stressing the opposition of ‘us’ (non-Russians from the Caucasus and Central Asia) and ‘you’ (native Russian speakers) thus uniting with other non-native speakers in this common identity imposed on them by Russians.

Similar dubious statuses and controversial strategies of ethnic representation are typical for other comedians working in this ‘ethnic field’. In 2014, in his interview for the Kyrgyz news-portal Limon.KG,⁴ Akim Karasaev who had previously appeared on the Russian TV show ‘Comedy Battle’ as ‘an oriental man in Kazakh khalat’ stated:

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

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAuBR75Q9Nk> (May 31, 2022).

⁴ <https://limon.kg/ru/news:63136> (May 31, 2022).

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 said 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* [guest workers]. 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'

Comments on YouTube videos of ethnic stand-up reveal the same controversy. Some of the people who can identify with the depicted 'Easterners' accuse comedians of maintaining negative and/or false stereotypes. Thus, in his video,⁵ Evgenii Chebatkov, a native Russian speaker but a citizen of Kazakhstan, depicts 'his Kazakh friend Dosik in Canada', and some commentators have expressed offence at his 'exaggerated accent' and unflattering depiction of the Kazakhs:

С акцентом переигрывает, я такой не встречал
'He overacts the accent, I have never seen such a thing'

Бесит он как будто все казахи так разговаривают какими то калхозниками выставляет казахов

'He annoys me, as if all Kazakhs speak like that, he portrays the Kazakhs as some collective farmers'.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvOWYEjMHDo> (May 31, 2022).

However, other commentators state that Chebatkov, first, portrays the Kazakhs very accurately and, second, has a right to do so as he is from Kazakhstan himself:

Он в точности копирует қазақша акцент

‘He copies Kazakh [the word is written in the Kazakh language] accent precisely’

Потому что Чебатков казах, про своих он может шутить

‘Because Chebatkov is Kazakh, he can make jokes about his people’.

Most interestingly, there are numerous comments from the Kazakhs living abroad praising the comedian for his true representation of ‘the sweet Kazakh speech’ evoking nostalgic memories:

Так передать казахский акцент, как будто на родину вернулся

‘He conveys the Kazakh accent so well, as if I’ve returned to my homeland’

Спасибо. Чуть взгрустнул за границей, давно не слышал родной казахской речи лол

‘Thank you. Became a bit sad abroad, haven’t heard my native Kazakh speech for a long time lol’.

It is evident that there is a request for representation among non-native Russian speakers residing in Russia and consuming its cultural products. A younger generation savvy both in consumption and production of video-content starts filling this gap in their non-professional video performances.

4. Grassroots level of performative use of non-native accents

This section deals with the internal representation of ethnic accents among the youth, mostly with a migration background. Young people of non-Russian ethnic origin spread short YouTube and TikTok

videos imitating the accents of different ethnic groups. Some videos become viral, and even many years after being uploaded they are still watched and generate thousands of comments. In terms of their online existence, therefore, there is no evident line of demarcation between popular stand-up comedy and those non-professional videos. Moreover, their authors, sometimes, after achieving success of their vlogs, start a professional career, as happened, for example, to Anisa Murtaeva, the author of the popular video *Тупа диалекты, ну* (2012).⁶ At the same time, the video clips created for followers have some common features that will be discussed here.

In comparison with the 'official' comedy, where the imitation of accents is usually integrated in a 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 *Hawa Russia* actors, the main strategies for imitating accents in videos created by non-native Russian speakers are pitch and intonation, as well as 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. Moreover, different speakers use a similar way of describing a particular style of speaking. For example, they pronounce a bilabial [w] instead of Russian labiodental [v] and [y] instead of unstressed [a] in 'Chechen Russian'. This suggests that this imitation of speech is based on an actual communicative experience and listening to different pronunciations and distinguishes this internal approach to accents from an external approach (merging all the accents together) typical for Russian speakers and/or aimed at a Russian, or even a foreign audience. For example, in the video *The most remarkable accents of the Russian language*⁷ created in 2021 by the vlogger *The Alex [Russian Teacher]*

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sU0MZVrFQSM> (May 31, 2022).

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ji1Tnu2oO0> (May 31, 2022).

the speaker presents and explains in English, Ukrainian, Georgian (illustrated by Arkadii Rajkin's video from the Soviet times), Armenian, Chechen (illustrated by the speech of the notorious Chechnya leader Ramzan Kadyrov) and also 'northern' and 'southern' accents of Russian mixing up actual linguistic features with stereotypes, such as the use of a discourse marker *дон* typical for Kadyrov and, consequently, ascribed to all Chechen speakers. When asked about Central Asian accents in the comments, he replies:

It's pretty hard to think of many certain pronunciation features, I think they also change the stress or add one more stress in words, also they sometimes "omit" the "p" sounds (like "касавица" instead of "красавица") and in an extreme case they change "ч" to "ц" ("наицальник" instead of "начальник"). Usually their Russian is very poor and super-hard to understand, unlike that of most Caucasians :)

Evidently, in his comment he describes less a real Tajik or Uzbek accent, but more a *Наша Russia* version of it.

'Internal' portraying of accents is, therefore, closer to reality and less affected by language stereotypes than the external one. However, ethnic stereotypes are employed widely and are quite often very similar to those represented in official TV shows. Caucasians can be depicted as criminals and Central Asians as socially inferior and not very bright people. Mentioning a particular ethnic label serves as a reference to the stereotype, as in the extract below from the video *Памирец говорит на русском с разными акцентами*:⁸

– Давай азербайджанский начинай тогда
 – Брааат! Первый мафия, первый мафия это азербайджанцы
 'Come on, start with Azeri then'
 'Brother! The first [=most important] mafia, the first mafia are the Azeris'

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNmUUrCnwH8&t=7s> (May 31, 2022).

It should also be noted that the set of portrayed vernaculars varies among speakers. Two points can be emphasised here. First, the selection of a represented variety reflects the 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. For example, in the video *Акцент разных наций Кавказа* (@luna69166, Tik-Tok, 2020) the speaker shows 'Dagestani', 'Ossetian', 'Ingush or Chechen, whatever', 'Kabardian' and 'Balkar'. This list, therefore, follows the administrative structure of the North Caucasus, but it marks some varieties as more or less familiar: the speaker is not sure about the differences between Ingush and Chechen but distinguishes Kabardian and Balkar very explicitly. Meanwhile, the speaker in the video quoted above (*Памирец говорит на русском с разными акцентами*) portrays Central Asians including some regional accents, e.g. Pamir as different from Tajik accent (he was himself born in Pamir) but provides a less detailed picture of Caucasian varieties ('Azeri', 'Chechen', 'Dargwa', and 'all other Dagestani accents'). Many speakers mix regional and linguistic groups, in particular, in the case of Dagestan. The Republic of Dagestan is highly multilingual; at the same time, the local Russian has many common areal features typical for speakers with different native languages (Daniel *et al.* 2010). The videos, therefore, highlight groups that are important for the speaker; they represent different categorizations and provide more or less detailed descriptions of each group. The name for a specific accent shows a process of 'making language' (Krämer *et al.* 2022) or 'language labelling' (Pennycook, Otsuji 2015).

The second point concerns the interaction between speakers from different minority groups. An important feature of such videos is their dialogical nature. In opposition to an imitation of dialogue in stand-up comedy (where contributions by the audience can be very limited and designed and manipulated by the comedian),

home-made 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 (which can be both language- and gender-mixed company) asks this person to show a specific accent or ask questions (as in the examples above).

In other videos, the focus is not on just one speaker but on a representation of naturally occurring dialogues, as, for example, in a video recorded in a school class during a break where a student tries to imitate his friend's accent and employs other ethnic styles of speaking in the process of language play.⁹ Such videos represent a process of negotiation on language and ethnic identity; solidarity is expressed through demonstrating some knowledge about languages or accents of each other. Metalinguistic teasing ('as you [name of a particular group] speak') becomes a popular way of negotiating identity among Russian youth with different heritage languages and so should be treated as an important social practice. In the video *кавказские диалекты...смех до слез*, a group of young people are at a restaurant, and the speaker, provoked by his friends to start depicting different Caucasian accents, teases other speakers:

*Ты кто? Вика? Вика, я представляю себе голубоглазая блондинка, а не какая-нибудь носатая армянка*¹⁰

'Who are you? Vika? Vika, I imagine a blonde with blue eyes [the camera shows the girl] but not an Armenian girl with a long nose'.

Mocking other participants, the speaker also uses derogatory terms and characteristics describing himself. He replies as if quoting racist talk of Russian speakers:

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

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

⁹ The video was accessed March 15, 2019; later it was deleted from the platform and is not accessible.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VT8pKSCBaw> (May 31, 2022).

There are other different derogatory terms for unification, i.e. *мигранты*, *нерусские*, *черные* ‘migrants’, ‘non-Russians’, ‘black’ that appear in the videos. In making the video, the young people in it use such terms to empower themselves thanks to their sense of irony and non-acceptance of racism. In the comments to this video, people fight about those words: some take them at face value and accuse the vlogger of racism, while others defend them as ironic and antiracist. The main argument for them, again, is the speaker’s ethnicity; he is described as Georgian or Caucasian and so ‘has a right’ to mock other Caucasians, and his words regarding them should be treated as sarcasm:

*Это же сарказм, люди! Он же сам кавказец, по нему же видно.
Это просто “ирония”*

‘It is sarcasm, people! He is a Caucasian himself, you can tell by looking at him. This is simply “irony”’

So, ethnic stereotypes are used as a reverse tool to attack the racism of native Russian speakers, the same manner as in Rasul Chabdarov’s stand-up performances analysed above. At the same time, the reclaiming of derogatory terms is not fully understandable without the context.

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 Ossetian myself. :) You did Ossetian 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 of their actual correctness), as, e.g. in the case of the video *АКЦЕНТЫ, что это и как их пародировать?*¹¹

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhE1_5_PrFw (May 31, 2022).

Хрень! Вообще не похожие акценты

‘Bullshit! The accents are not similar at all’

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 do accents’

In such cases, there is a tendency for commentators with ethnically marked nicknames (e.g. *Магомед Магомедов* or *Любовь Хартунян*) to be more critical than others.

On the other hand, comments to all accent-related videos, regardless of their authorship, look particularly interesting in terms of multilingualism: usually, there are some phrases in languages other than Russian, e.g. in Kazakh or Uzbek, and some commentators try to imitate different accents in a written form:

Ээ малаладес настроения поднял (instead of *Молодец, настроение поднял*)

‘Good boy, you improved my mood’

Ты дон так сэ мнэй нэ рэзгуэрыай дон (instead of *Ты так со мной не разговаривай*)

‘You shouldn’t speak to me like that’.

In this sense, the videos provoke discussions on language-related questions, stimulate linguistic creativity and make the Russian web-space more multilingual and diverse.

5. Conclusions

When comparing our two sets of data, there is an evident distinction between mainstream TV stand-up comedy represented by the shows like *КВН* or *Наша Россия*, and the imitations of accents by minority speakers. In the first case, stereotypes of broken ‘non-Russian’ speech are employed, and the artists do not claim reliable representation or authenticity. Overall, they do not contribute to the awareness of the non-native accents produced by migrants or linguistic minorities of

the Russian Federation. On the other hand, 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 using Russian as a *lingua franca*. At the same time, they also employ stereotypes, exaggerate some features and add comic content to amuse their audience. The same is true for official stand-up artists of ethnic origin who can turn exaggerated accents into a tool to confront the viewers' prejudices while still making them laugh in the process.

The reaction of the audience, however, is less focused on the differences between more and less realistic ways of accents representations by professional stand-up artists and by minority speakers themselves. Instead, the comments evaluate the 'authenticity' of speakers based on information about their ethnic origin. The insider position of artists presupposes that they share some common knowledge with their audience and thus have the moral right to mock the accents. According to the majority of the audience, their performances are appraised as realistic representations of the given accents. However, videos created by ethnically Russian comedians or vloggers, even when employing the same linguistic features, can be perceived as a parody and racism. Interestingly, some commentators have remarked (sometimes with displeasure and even dismay) that there has been an increasing number of comments expressing offence in recent years. Indeed, old comments to the videos uploaded around ten years ago tend to be less critical than the recent ones. This may attest to the growing awareness of minority language speakers of their right to challenge monolingual ideology and ethnic prejudices of the Russian-speaking majority.

In terms of linguistic performance, unofficial videos create a colourful picture of communication between minorities. Mixed ethnic communities with a migration background begin reflecting on linguistic strategies and share their stereotypes about language with an accent. It represents the process of categorization of a

minority group by other people with minority background. The discussion of different accents and making a choice of which accent is worth being represented add them to the map of known idioms and groups. The context of the informal videos reflects the communication of migrant youth from different ethnic minorities. They mock and tease each other but identify themselves as members of the same group opposed to ‘Russians’; there are even some highly derogatory terms that minority youth reclaim for self-identification. The new solidarity of different linguistic minorities is a sign of empowerment and agency aiming to overcome the racism of the Russian society. Asking for representation and providing it in a ‘non-serious’, comic form, they simultaneously take a step towards claiming ‘a (socio)linguistic citizenship’ (Stroud 2015; Rampton *et al.* 2018), to be a part of the soundscape of a diverse multilingual space.

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RESÜMEE

VEENE KEELE AKTSENDID PERFORMATIIVSES KASUTUSES: NOORTE MUULASTE RAHVUSLIKUD STIILID, KEELEHOIAKUD JA IDENTITEEDID

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Uurimus tegeleb noorte mitmekeelsete vene keele rääkijate erinevate etniliste aktsentide performatiivse kasutusega. Eesmärgiks on näidata, kuidas etnilisi aktsente kasutatakse ükskeelsete silmaklapide vaidlustamiseks ja agentsuse tagasi saamiseks, et võidelda rahvuslike ja keeleliste eelarvamuste vastu. Uurimus põhineb TikToki ja Youtube'is avaldatud videote analüüsil, mille autorid on nii professionaalsed koomikud kui ka amatöörid ja mis esitlevad ja arutlevad muulaste erinevate aktsentide üle vene keeles. Et näidata publiku tüüpilisi reaktsioone, sisaldas analüüs ka videote metaandmeid ja kommentaare, mis väljendavad suhtumist aktsentide esitlusse ja keelelistesse stereotüüpidesse.

Võtmesõnad: noorte mitmekeelsus, keeleideoloogia, rahvuslik identiteet, vene keel, migratsioon, komöödia, vlogid

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