

FSU migrants on their 'audibility' in Russian urban environments: Self-reflection, communication patterns and performing migrant 'voices'

Urban environments of Russian megalopolises have gradually become more diverse due to, beside other factors, constant inflows of migrants from other former Soviet Union (FSU) countries. It is argued, however, that the majority of contemporary urban 'langscapes' in Russia have hardly manifested their multifaceted or vibrant composition, having hidden the large proportion of their ethnic and linguistic diversity into the underbelly of suburban and downcast areas (e.g. Fedorova & Baranova 2018). The variety of languages represented by migrant communities is therefore hardly acknowledged as a constituent of Russian urban culture but is nonetheless present as integral part of most city environments.

What this implies for incoming migrants is that their linguistic background – whether they are mono-, bi- or multilingual – has to go through critical changes once they move to Russian cities. Not only do they face strong sociolinguistic normativity which automatically labels them as 'non-native' speakers of the dominant language (i.e. Russian) and downgrades their proficiency in other FSU languages as irrelevant to their migrant present, but their own vision of language skills at hand changes, with inevitable consequences in communicative patterns which such 'calibration' to a new language regime implies – both at an individual and group level of interaction (cf. Cederberg 2014; Kramsch 2009; Phipps & Kay 2014).

Based on the results of ethnographic research carried out among post-Soviet migrants in large Russian cities in April-October 2017, the proposed paper seeks to look into migrants' own accounts of transformations their linguistic behavior undergoes in the new context of Russian urban culture. It examines their narratives through the prism of 'migrant audibility', or the perspective of perceived difference in their linguistic behavior and performative strategies to deal with it – both as individuals on the day-to-day basis or as a minority group with an emerging voice. I focus on three interrelated areas of migrants' sociolinguistic experiences as reported by my interviewees: a. transformations in their metalinguistic reflection incurred by the new language culture (when migrants start to adopt external perceptions of their linguistic behavior as 'non-standard' and themselves as 'audibly other'); b. transformations in their everyday communication in public spaces (i.e. how they choose to perform their reportedly non-standard linguistic behavior in relation to the local standard-language majority); c. practices of shaping a collective 'voice' as a discursive strategy of presenting migrant identity and placing it within a polyphony of urban language variants and lifestyle experiences.

References:

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