The late origins of the glottonym “русский язык”

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Abstract
There is no evidence for the use of the glottonym “русский язык” as a name of the Slavic dialects of medieval Rus’ in medieval texts until the mid-13th century. In its beginnings, the term obviously referred to a Scandinavian language: the language of the Varangians.

During the past decades, it has increasingly become uncommon to refer to issues pertaining to Medieval Rus’ as “Old Russian”, instead of “Old Rusan”. At the same time, first of all Russian scholars usually insist on using the term “древнерусский”, arguing that русский has two “closely related” meanings: 1. ‘Russian’, 2. ‘pertaining to Medieval Rus’. However, the difference between these meanings is in fact enormous, let alone the fact that many Old Rusan texts do not belong to the history of the Russian language as such, but rather to the history of the Ukrainian or Belarusan language (let alone the issue of Church Slavonic). Furthermore, based on the widespread notion of some imagined quasi-unified “Old Russian” language, a number of striking territorial differences within the territories—and even the former territories—of Medieval Rus’ get lost against the background of the “larger picture”. To give just one example: various lexical entries in the SRJa XI–XIV lead users to the erroneous conclusion that they are typical of “Old Russian” in general. A closer look reveals that they are testified in documents from comparatively small regions only (Moser, 2011: 19–39). The situation is the same at all other linguistic levels.

While fully sharing the enthusiasm about the language of medieval Novgorod (Zaliznjak, 2004), it remains a mystery how the uniqueness of this language has not yet erased the traditional views of a (more or less) unitarian “Old Russian” language. Mere logic based on a

1 The genuine language of Novgorod was basically erased by Ivan IV’s forces during the Massacre of Novgorod in 1570.

2 Admittedly, the traditional view does not completely neglect “dialectal differences,” but it is virtually impossible to determine the difference between languages and dialects in medieval Rus’, first and foremost in light of the “uniqueness” of the language of medieval Novgorod. Other traditional terms such as западнорусский “Western Russian” and югозападнорусский “South Western Russian”, which are traditionally employed to refer to early modern Belarusan or Ukrainian issues, should be replaced with “Ruthenian” (in its Belarusan or Ukrainian variant) because they have very little to do with the Russian language.

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combination of the findings of George Shevelov (1979) and Andrei Zaliznjak (2004) barely allows for any other conclusion than the following: A unitarian language of Medieval Rus’ never existed. What is at stake are Slavic dialects that were divided at a quite early stage (see the palatalization of velars etc.) and then developed some common or closely related features, but at the same time split up increasingly. These Slavic dialects were later used as a basis for the formation of separate languages, namely Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusan and earlier written varieties. It is only misleading to label these dialects “Old Russian” as long as we are not only dealing with dialects that actually served as a foundation for the formation of the Russian (and not the Ukrainian or Belarusan) language. As primarily scholars of Ukrainian studies have been arguing for decades, such dialects can be reasonably labeled Proto-Russian, Proto-Ukrainian, or Proto-Belarusan (see Shevelov, 1979 or also Schaller, 1990, who opts for the term “Altostslavisch”, i.e.: Old East Slavic). At least in the beginnings, the superregional vernacular-based written varieties of medieval Rus’ were obviously oriented toward the language of Kyiv (and were thus not Russian by origin; for a discussion see Zaliznjak, 2004: 7 and Moser, 2016: 6–13).

Aside from that, it should be considered that even the glottonomy of the early centuries does not offer any justification for the traditional approach. It is of course true that to our knowledge, nobody used the term “Ukrainian language” in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, it is much less well known when precisely the term rusьскъјь jazykъ (< jzykъ) referring to Slavic varieties came into being. An examination of electronic editions of the Rus’ chronicles (Hyp., Laur, Novg.), electronically edited anthologies of written texts of Medieval Rus’ (Bilec’kij, 1952) (these sources are edited on the site http://litopys.org.ua/),3 historical dictionaries (SRJa 11–17, 1975; Sreznevskij, 1958), and other sources (see below) reveals results that might come as a surprise: The term was never employed to refer to a Slavic dialect of Rus’ in medieval written sources up to the mid-13th century, i.e., the aftermath of the collapse of this medieval state under the pressure of the Mongols (who conquered Kyiv in 1240).4

The following well-known entry in the Rus’ chronicle for the year of 898 could serve as a possible counterexample at first sight:

Словѣнскъ языкъ и Рускыи ядьнц. Ы Варѧгъ бо презязкаса Русью. а пѣрвѣє бѣша Словѣне. аще и Полѧне звахусѧ. но Словѣньскаꙗ рѣчь бѣ. По̑лѧми же прозвашасѧ. занеже в полѣ сѣдѧху. языкъ Словѣньскыи бѣ имъ єдинъ (Hyp.: s. a. 898).

But the Slavs and the Russes are one people, for it is because of the Varangians that the latter became known as Rus’, though originally they were Slavs. While some Slavs were termed Polyanians, their speech was still Slavic, for they were known as Polyanians because they lived in the fields. But they had the same Slavic language (RPC, 1953, 63).

We fully agree with by Samuel Hazard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, the translators of the 1953 English-language edition of the Primary Chronicle, that the term “языкъ [...] Рускыи” obviously does not refer to a language here.5 What the chronicler actually told us was that the “Slavic people” and the “Rus’” people (i.e., the Varangians and their closest

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3We conducted searches for азъ-, язъ-, язъ, русъ-, русъ-, словъ-, славъ-.
4We also explored the “Древнерусский корпус” ‘Old Russian Corpus’ (https://ruscorpora.ru/new/search-old_rus.html; search on 18 June 2022) despite its odds (e.g., inconsistent orthography, too long entries).
5The old French translation by Louis Léger (1884: 34) is not convincing at all: “Or, on sait que la langue russe et la langue slavonne ne sont rien qu’une même langue, que ce nom de Russes nous a été donné des Varègues, et qu’auparavant nous n’étions connus que sous le nom des Slaves; le Polaniens qui se trouvaient parmi les
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...allies) were together "as one", and that the latter were called "Rus’" from the "Varangians". 6

The vernacular language of the Slavs of Rus’ is unequivocally labelled “Slavic”.

We will not elaborate on the development of the term “Rus’” here again (see Hens’ors’kyj, 1962 [with some exaggerations, M. M.]; Moser & Vakoulenko, 2019). 7 Instead, we continue our focus on glottonymic issues and start with a reference to Constantine VII Porphyrogenetus (Porphyrogenitus) (Greek: Κωνσταντῖνος Πορφυρογέννητος; 905–959), who, in his De administrando imperio, listed almost all names of the Dnipro rapids in two languages, as in ‘Росисти мёв, Оу́лбора̀й, Склави́знети дё, ’Остробо́униро̀х (Rhódisiti men, Ourvorsi, Skławenistí de, Ostrowunipurach) (cf. Šaxmatov & Kryms’kyj, 1924: 11; CP, 1967: 58);

called in Rusan 8 Oulvorsi, and in Slavonic Ostrowoupinprach” (CP, 1967: 59). As in this example, all “Rusan” names are Scandinavian (here: Ulvorsi 9 = Holmfors) (cf. Šaxmatov & Kryms’kyj, 1924:11; CP, 1967:58); “called in Rusan Oulvorsi, and in Slavonic Ostrowouniprach” (CP, 1967: 59). As in this example, all “Rusan” names are Scandinavian (here: Ulforsi = Holmfors) (cf. Šaxmatov & Kryms’kyj, 1924:11; CP, 1967:58); “called in Rusan Oulvorsi, and in Slavonic Ostrowoupinprach” (CP, 1967: 59).

In the oldest entries of the Hypatios Chronicle and other manuscripts the adjectival form russьskyj almost exclusively refers to nouns designating social roles such as кнѧзи ‘dukes’, вои ‘warriors’ 9, or some territory, such as земля ‘land’ (very frequently), грды (городы) ‘fortresses’. Only the entry s. a. 1252 reveals the first combinations with abstract nouns: самъ же ѣха подлѣ королѧ. по ѡбыт̣оу Рускому ‘he himself went after the king according to Rus’ habits’ and ръ ѣму королъ не взѧлъ быхъ тѣсѧще серебра за то ѣже ѣсі пришелъ. ѡбыт̣оу Рускому ми̣дй в сво̣хъ ‘and the king told him, ‘I would not have taken one thousand of silber pieces only because you have come according to the Rus’ habits of your forefathers’ (both examples from Hyp. 814: s. a. 1252; afterwards we encounter a combination with the nomen actionis устремленьє ‘striving’).

The entry for the year 945 in the Laurentius Chronicle cites the treaties between Constantinople and Rus’ and refers to the law and statutes of Rus’ as opposed to Greek law:

“по закону Гречъскому. [и] по уста[в]оу и по закону Рускому [....] повиненъ закону Рускому и Гречъскому [....] по закону Рускому” (Laur.: s. a. 945).

Slaves, n’avaient non plus d’autre language. Le nom de Polaniens, qu’on leur donnait venait des champs qu’ils cultivaient, et parce qu’ils habitaient la plaine, mais ils étaient d’origine slave, et n’avaient d’autre langue que le slavon.

6 The following entry from the prologue obviously reveals jazykъ in the meaning ‘people’ too: “в де ео токшь Славенскихъ языковъ, в Руси Полани Древлѧн. Новъгородь. Полочане. Дрѣговitches. Северъ. Бужѧне. дай сталять по Бугу. всяке не Кьльшане” (Hyp. 10, Prolog), cf. “quant à la nôtre, elle était seulement en usage en Russie, chez les Polaniens, les Drevliens, les Novgorodians, les Polotanians, les Drégovitches et les Sérévien-Buschianians [*], M. M. и S. V.], qui se tenaient à l’angle du fleuve, derrière les Volingiens” (Léger, 1884: 9).

7 A small part of Moser & Vakoulenko, 2019 (pp. 132–134) presents a strongly abbreviated version of this new article. The medieval part was basically written by myself. Serhij VakoUlenko found the above-cited translation by Léger.

8 CP 1963, 59 has “Russian”.

9 The Laurentius Chronicle (and, similarly, the Novgorod Chronicle) reports about Ol’ha: “просвѣщна же бывши. радовашесѧ душѧю и тѣломъ. и пооучи ю патреархъ вѣрѣ. [и] реч̑ єи блгс̑на тъı в [женах] Руских̑. ꙗко возлюби свѣтъ. а тьму ѣстави. блгс̑вти тѧ хотѧть снв̑е Рустии. [и] в послѣдни родъ внукъ твоих̑. и заповѣда єи цркв̃нмь оуставѣ. ѡ м҃лтвѣ и ѡ постѣ. ѡ милс̑тни и ѡ въздержаньи тѣла чиста” (Laur. 61: s. a. 955): ‘When Olga [or Ol’ha, M. M.] was enlightened, she rejoiced in soul and body. The Patriarch, who instructed her in the faith, said to her, ‘Blessed art thou among the women of Rus’, for thou hast loved the light, and quit the darkness. The sons of Rus’ shall bless thee to the last generation of thy descendants.’ He taught her the doctrine of the Church, and instructed her in prayer and fasting, in almsgiving, and in the maintenance of chastity’ (RPC, 1953: 82).
The Chronicle also tells us something about Jaroslav “the Wise” and his qualities and activities:

Jaroslav loved religious establishments and was devoted to priests, especially to monks. He applied himself to books, and read them continually day and night. He assembled many scribes and, and translated from Greek into Slavic. He wrote and collected many books through which true believers are instructed and enjoy religious education (RPC, 1953: 137).

Although the language referred to as “the Slavic language” was in fact Church Slavonic it deserves to be mentioned that the word Rusan was not used in this context either. All other entries for русский in the Laurentius Chronicle refer to territories, rulers, etc. There are only few exceptions. A reference to Ol’ha mentions “Rusan cognizance”, but the other manuscripts have a more convincing wording: рускої землі познаньє, i.e., “cognizance of the land of Rus’”:

Thus we say to her, “Rejoice in the Russes’ knowledge of God” [or rather: in the cognizance of the Rus’ land, M. M.], for we were the first fruits of their reconciliation with Him. She was the first from Rus’ to enter the kingdom of God, and the sons of Rus’ thus praise her as their leader, for since her death she has interceded with God in their behalf” (RPC, 1953: 86–87).

Volodymyr Monomakh, in his Поученьѥ ‘Instruction’, pointed to the fact that his baptismal name (въ кр҃щнїи) was Василии ‘Vasilij’, yet his name in the Rus’ society was Volodymyr (Русьскъıмь именемь Володимиръ) (Laur.: s. a. 1096). This example is thus not a convincing proof that русский was used in a linguistic meaning either. Aside from that, Monomakh emphasized that his father, because he had been sitting at home, had acquired a command of five languages: какоже вь мiй мин дома сьда, изъульшшы. Бывшись, и мъ по число молаше Бъ за Русь (Laur.: s. a. 969).

The entry for 1243 again unequivocally refers to the people, not to the language:

Grand Duke Jaroslav went to the Tatars to Batu and sent his son Konstantin to the Khan. And Batu greatly honored Jaroslav and his men. And he released him and said to him: “Jaroslav, be the eldest of all dukes among the Rus’ people!” And Jaroslav returned to his land with great honor (my own translation).
Only the Slavic, not the “Rusan” language was thus mentioned in the oldest texts (first of all, in the chronicles). Aside, not surprisingly, some foreign languages were mentioned, particularly Greek and Hebrew, which were also referred to in Old Rusan glosses: ινε and οικεδαι γρεκας, εστε γρεκας; елиньскы [...] парицаеть; еврьиски [...] парицаеть ‘as it is called in Greek’, ‘as it is put in Hebrew’, etc. (Nimčuk, 1980: 18). Other peoples were regarded as mute, as mentioned in reference to Finno-Ugrian peoples of Rus’: Оугра же сьть люди языць егьмь. и селацатса сь Самоедъ (Hyp.: s. a. 1096) ‘[The Yugra] are an alien [literally: mute, M. M.] people dwelling with the Samoyedes’ (RPC, 1953: 184).

But since when was the expression руский язык employed with reference to the Slavic dialects of Rus’? The oldest examples can be encountered in quite late entries. One of them could be found s. a. 1261; at the same time, this is the only example of the noun языкь in the Galician-Wolhynian Chronicle altogether:

и послѧ с Василкоꙗ, три Татарьꙗ, именѧвъ. Кузгꙗнцъ. Ашка Болюꙗ. и к тьму толмѧу рєзуꙗкиꙗцѧ Рѹскꙗыꙗ языцъ [Chlebnikov und Pogodin manuscripts: язык]. (Hyp.: s. a. 1261).10

And with Vasyl’ko he sent three Tatars named Kujčyj, Ašyk, and Boliuk, and, in addition, a translator who understood the Rus’ language (my own translation).

Obviously, it comes not as a surprise that glottonyms are first and foremost employed when an opposition to other languages makes a difference, but even those fragments of medieval chronicles and law texts which might have given an opportunity to employ the term руский язык do not reveal it.

Only since the 13th century the glottonym can be found in Old Rusan glossaries that were usually based on Greek models. The first glossary is labeled О именъхъ и глѧемыхъ жидовскꙗмь языцьмь. Оказано. И преложено неразоумноꙗ на разоумъ (this glossary is part of a 13th-century collection with no precise dating); the two following glossaries do use the glottonym that is at stake: А се имена жидовскаꙗ, роуськы тълкована; Рєчь жидовскаго языка, преложена на роускоꙗ. Неразумно. На разоумъ, и въ евангѣлиꙗхъ. И въ апѣ(с)лхъ. и въ псалтыри. и въ пармиꙗх. И въ прочихъ книгахъ (the last text is part of the Novgorod Kormčaja of 1282) (Nimčuk, 1980: 21–25). Another quite short glossary entitled Тол(ъ)кованїє языка половец(ъ)рокѣ(г)ъ[о] пер(ъ)вꙗе половец(ъ)ки. А рєчь рѹскꙗыꙗ has been preserved in late copies of the 16th century only; Vasyl’ Nimčuk and others concurred that its original probably stems from late medieval Rus’ too (Nimčuk, 1980).

An examination of a broad sample of medieval Rusan texts and all extant historical dictionaries of the Russian and the Ukrainian languages thus leads us to the conclusion that everything we can say with some certainty about the glottonym руский язык denoting the Slavic language(s) of one of the Rus’ realms’ is that its first attestations stem from the late 13th century only: In SRJa 11–17 (1975), e.g., the oldest entries for the adjective and the adverb with reference to language stem from the 16th century. At the same time, it should be added that as soon as the glottonym руский язык was coined it did not only refer to the vernacular dialects of Rus’, but also to the Church Slavonic language. In reference to medieval Rus’ prior to the mid-13th century, the label руский язык is thus to a certain extent anachronistic.

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10 The Novgorod Chronicle of the older and younger recension (Novg.) do not yield any examples of руский язык, etc.; the same applies to the birchbark letters (Zaliznjak, 2004).
Declarations

Conflict of Interest  The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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