

# Russenorsk

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A Language Sketch



# Sociolinguistic Features

- Russenorsk (RN) is a dual-source pidgin from Norwegian and Russian (Smith calls it a mixed language or pidgin).
- It was spoken in northern Norway between Russian merchants and Norwegian fishermen.



# Social Settings of Use

- Summer fish trade
- Russians staying in Norway for the winter
- Social contact (i.e., playing ball, feasts, religious occasions)
- Extensive contact led to printed dictionaries, textbooks, Russian newspapers in RN
- Speakers were Norwegian, Russian, Sami, Finnish, Dutch and Lappish



# Timeline of Language Spread

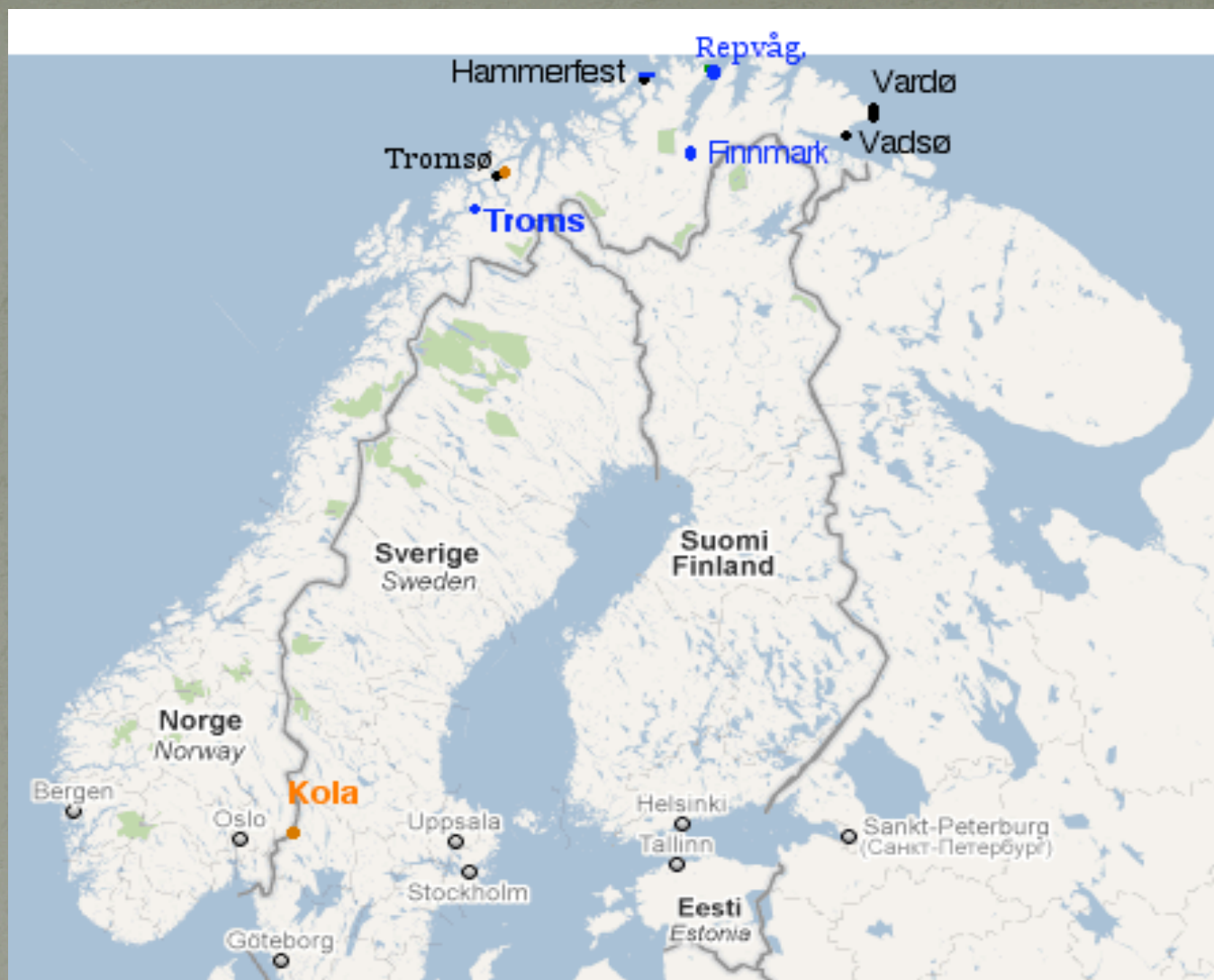
- 1700s: trade took place in Vardø, Vadsø , Hammerfest, and Tromsø
- 1785: earliest recorded instance of RN in a lawsuit – a witness was identified as ‘Rusmand Gregorius Pettersøn Breche’. Soon after a Russian fisherman shouted ‘krallum’ about a Danish person.
- 1800s: spoken in Finnmark, Troms, Hammerfest and Repvåg. All social settings appropriate, including high society



# Timeline of Language Spread

- 1842: Speech spreads from Tromsø to Kola (740 km)
- 1855: peak of Pomor trade along the White Sea coast (in Russian 'Pomor'e')
- After 1850: social acceptability of RN wanes as merchants begin to learn Russian.
- 1900: trade in northern Europe becomes cash-based rather than barter-based, merchants become businessmen competent in Russian
- 1923: RN has completely disappeared.





Key:  
1700s  
Pre-1850  
1842



# Unique Things about Russenorsk

- RN's lifespan was more than 150 years, which is rare for a pidgin to do without creolizing.
- RN's users were social equals, which means there was no social distinction between parent languages.
- Rather than learn one another's language since direct contact was only seasonal, trading groups created the pidgin in order to communicate.



# Did RN Come From Another Pidgin?

- Some hypothesize that RN is an international lexicon with grammar deployed according to the individual speaker's L<sub>1</sub>.
- Others believe it arose from an older regional pidgin.
- Evidence for both: heavy lexical influence from Lappish and Finnish, Kjachta (a Sino-Russian pidgin), and English
- Evidence for an older pidgin: the same area had a Lappish-Swedish pidgin.



# Why Do We Think This?

- Lappish has strong traces in RN
- Lapps were characterized as multilingual and often created secret languages.
- Doublets in RN can be explained either as instability or as relexification; the considerable degree of uniformity in RN's grammatical structure suggests relexification from an older pidgin.



# Why Wouldn't We Think This?

- The process of “relexification” seems to last the whole lifespan of RN, suggesting that it was a process of altering the language after its conception rather than a foundation from the beginning.
- Doublets could be caused by lexical competition thanks to the social equality between source languages.



## An Interesting Aspect of RN

- It has been suggested that Norwegian speakers of RN thought they were speaking Russian, and vice versa.
- This is possible because many speakers were illiterate, and when children in Norway encountered Russians, the Russians spoke RN to them to make themselves easier to understand.
- Though maybe researchers were confused by all the names people used for RN, some of which were also used to mean “Russian” or “Norwegian”.
- We can’t be sure but the majority of authors believe it.



# Linguistic Structure

## Phonology

“Russenorsk phonology is based on Russian and Norwegian, but sounds and consonant clusters not found in both languages are avoided or simplified” (Jahr 109)

### Expected Simplified Phonemic Inventory:

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental & Alveolar	Post- Alveolar	Palatal	Velar
Nasal	m		n			
Plosive	p    b		t    d			k    g
Fricative		f	s	ʃ		
Trill			r			
Approximant			l		j	

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		u
Mid	e	(ə)	o
Open			



# Phonological Processes

- Russian does not have Norwegian's /h/ phoneme
  - /h/ → /g/ in Russenorsk
    - /hav/ 'sea' became /gav/
- Norwegian does not have Russians /x/ phoneme
  - /x/ → /k/
    - /xoroʂo/ 'good' became /koroʂo/

(Holm 623)



# Lexicon

Russenorsk's vocabulary derives from both Norwegian (estimated 47 percent) and Russian (39 percent), with some forms (about 10 percent) coming from Dutch/Low German, English, French, Swedish, and Sami (Broch 47)

Russenorsk is comprised of about 400 words, with a core vocabulary of about 150-200 words (Jahr 109).

For many concepts, both a Russian-based and a Norwegian-based item are attested. For example, both Norwegian *ikke* and Russian *njet* occur as negation (Coetsem). While these doublets are reflected in the nouns, verbs, and adjectives of Russenorsk, functional items do not have bases in both Russian and Norwegian (Broch 48)

# Morphology

- Verbs have no markers for tense, aspect, or person. The suffix *–om* is a general verbal marker, though it is not always used (Jahr 110)
- The suffix *–a* is often used as a noun marker, however, not as clearly as *–om* is used to mark verbs. (Jahr mentions that this *–a* suffix is paralleled in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Icelandic-Basque pidgin [115])
  - E.g. *fiska* ‘fish’
  - Exceptions:
    - Russian nouns ending in *–i* (e.g. *kruski* ‘cup’)
    - Single-syllable nouns from Norwegian (e.g. *skip* ‘ship’)
- The suffix *–mann* is used to designate nationality/ethnicity or social groups (e.g. *russmann* ‘Russian’, *burmann* ‘Norwegian’, *kukmann* ‘merchant’ Jahr 114, Broch 37)



# Morphology (cont'd)

- Compounding
  - *kuasjorta* ‘cow-shirt’ = cowhide
  - *kuasalt* ‘cow-salt’ = salted meat
  - *morradag* ‘tomorrow-day’ = tomorrow
- Reduplication
  - *morra-morradag* ‘tomorrow tomorrow-day’ = day after tomorrow

(Broch 37)

# Syntax

- The fundamental word order is SVO (Holm 624).
- Sentences are combined through parataxis, the juxtaposition of clauses or phrases without the use of coordinating or subordinating conjunctions; embedding and subordination are attested (Jahr 113)
- The syntactic possibilities are quite restricted. The largest variety seems to have developed in interrogative sentences, which is not unexpected considering that Russenorsk was used to ask questions about prices and barter for merchandise (Jahr 110)



# Syntax (cont'd)

- Two syntactic rules
  - Tendency to have the verb in final position when the sentence contains an adverbial (Jahr 115) (Note: Not found in Norwegian, unusual in Russian [Winford 284])
    - (1) *tvoja kopom oreka?*  
you buy nut  
'You buy nuts?'
    - (2) *moja kopom fiska*  
I buy fish  
'I buy fish.'
    - (3) *moja tri vekkel stannom*  
I three week stand  
'I stayed three weeks.'

# Syntax (cont'd)

- The negator (i.e Norwegian *ikke* or Russian *njet*) is restricted to second position (Note: not found in either Norwegian or Russian)
  - (8) *etta njet dobra*  
this not good  
'This is not good.'
  - (9) *moja njet lygom*  
I not lie  
'I don't lie.'
  - (10) *på den dag ikke russefolk robotom*  
on that day not Russians work  
'On that day, Russians do not work'



# Syntax (cont'd)

- Exceptions to both rules. The following sentence violates both rules:
  - (11) *mangoli år    moja njet smotrom tvoja.*  
many    year I    not see    you  
‘I have not seen you for many years.’
  - (12) *mangoli år    njet moja tvoja smotrom.*  
many    year not I    you    see

# På

- På is recognized as the only preposition in Russenorsk. It is claimed to express all the dependent relationships in a sentence, even a possessive relationship (Broch 45)

a.	Possessive:	<i>klokka på ju</i>	(your watch)
b.	Local:	<i>mala penge på lamma</i>	(little money in the pocket)
c.		<i>principal på sjib?</i>	(Is the captain on board the ship?)
d.	Temporal:	<i>på morradag</i>	(tomorrow)
e.		<i>på gammel ras</i>	(last year)
f.	Directional:	<i>moja tvoja på vater kasstom</i>	(I will throw you in the water)
g.		<i>nogoli dag tvoja reisa på Arkangel otsuda?</i>	(How many days did you travel from Archangel (to get) here?)
h.		<i>på Arkangel reisom</i>	(go to Archangel)



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