Contact-induced Russian Pluperfect-type forms in Belarus

Modern Standard Russian has a construction derived from the Slavic Pluperfect, viz. the bylo-construction: an invariable particle bylo plus a form of past tense (finite or participial: pošěl bylo, pošděšij bylo). It signifies in standard speech a disturbance of the natural flow of events (cf. Barentsen 1986, Kagan 2011), including avertive, cancelled attempt and some other uses; with participles, it marks more often cancelled result.

Until the 17th-18th centuries Russian used to have a Pluperfect construction with an inflected auxiliary that co-occurred only with finite past forms (pošěl byl, byla, bylo, byli). The same more archaic construction, inherited from the Old East Slavic “supercompound” form with two auxiliaries, is still attested (and called Pluperfect, “anterior past”, or “remote past”) in Ukrainian and Belarusian (cf. Xrakovskij 2015 or Sitchinava 2013), as well as in some Russian dialects, including Northern Russian (cf. Pozharitskaya 1996, 2015) and even the central transitional zone, eg the dialects of the Murom region (Ter-Avanesova 2016). It is usually more archaic than Modern Standard Russian bylo from the semantic point of view as well, as it allows for additional uses like frame past situation, cancelled result (like Dom sgorel byl, no ego otstroili ‘The house (lit. had) burned down, but it has been rebuilt since’) or introduction marker in discourse (cf. residual use of the formula žili-byli ‘once upon a time, there lived’ in Standard Russian). These types of uses were also attested more or less in Old East Slavic (cf. Petrukhin, Sitchinava 2006) and are also known for Pluperfects cross-linguistically.

The dialects in question often feature as well the variant with an invariable particle (bylo sometimes further truncated to byl) which usually has also additional non-canonical meanings from the viewpoint of Standard Russian (including, for example, frame past meanings, synonymous to the standard particle byvalo, or irrealis).

The non-canonical Russian forms, related to the OES Pluperfect, both with inflected and uninflected byl- auxiliary, are attested also in the Russian language in Belarus where they have not been hitherto studied. The studied material was standard-oriented (that cannot be qualified as trasjanka or mixed Russian-Belarusian language but still depart on different levels from the Standard Russian) non-literary Russian texts of the Belarusian cities (both from the oral sources and the Web forums), as well as literary texts, including translations from Belarusian to Russian made by Belarusian translators (and available in the Russian-Belarusian parallel corpus collected within the Russian National Corpus). The non-literary speech features both forms with an inflected auxiliary (of the xodili byli type) and the non-canonical uses of the invariable particle (of the xodil bylo type). The literary texts offer only the latter class of examples, as the inflected auxiliary forms are far “less Russian” and are clearly avoided in formal writing.

As far as the non-literary texts are concerned it is often possible to analyze the forms in question as a substrate phenomenon rather than a synchronically contact-induced one (as many speakers in cities typically use Russian as their first language and have little contact with the traditional Belarusian speakers). The examples include cases like Vy, navernoe, svoj noutbuk zakryli byli ‘You should have closed (and then opened) your laptop’, Na mnovente perezagružilsja byl kompjuter ‘The computer was rebooted for a moment’ with the meaning of cancelled result (which is generally possible for Standard Russian bylo but not in the contexts in question); Na SSSR napali byli ‘The Soviet Union had been attacked’ with the meaning of Perfect-in-the-Past.
These meanings are also attested for the Belarusian Pluperfect construction (of the type xadziŭ byŭ) and also typologically, as well as for the Pluperfects of the other languages of the East Circum-Baltic area, including e. g. Lithuanian (cf. Wiemer 2009).

The non-canonical instances of bylo that are found in the translations of Belarusian fiction to Russian are of particular interest because they are not always directly transparent from the original: sometimes they emerge where in Belarusian there is no Pluperfect. For example, the sentence from Vitaŭt Čaropka’s story with a trivial use of Belarusian Conditional: I mne xacelasja nešta sačynic’. Hetae nešta pačynalasja b slovami… ‘And I wanted compose something; this something would begin like this…’ is translated by Taccjana Zaryckaja as Xotelos’ čto-to sočinit’. Èto čto-načinalos’ bylo slovami… with a non-canonical bylo construction that has irreal semantics (attested for the Belarusian Pluperfect as well as typologically) instead of the Russian by-Conditional, cognate to the Belarusian form, that would be perfectly grammatical. Comparable phenomena can be found also in translations from Ukrainian (including those made by bilingual Ukrainian-Russian writers).

These uses of Pluperfect-related forms in Russian spoken in Belarus are an example of a contact-induced “restoration” of more archaic semantics characteristic for Early Modern Russian and OES, and can be paralleled to the uses of Pluperfect in Northern Russian dialects (where it can be both archaic and secondary phenomena, the latter due to the contact with Finnic languages, cf. Petrukhin, Sitchinava 2006).

References


