

# Arnold McMillin

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"Мобы и кульмура Беларусі:  
нарысы", Ніна Мячкоўская, Мінск  
2008 : [recenzja]

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach  
dozwolonego użytku.

ARNOLD McMILLIN  
Londyn

**Ніна Мячкоўская, *Мовы і культура Беларусі: нарысы*,  
Менск: ВТАА, 2008, „Права і эканоміка”, 347 сс.**

This very welcome book of essays makes an important contribution to the understanding of the current complex socio-linguistic situation in Belarus. Professor Miačkouskaja is already the author of eight books of monographs and essays, and the present volume begins with a review of her career by a grateful former student who rightly emphasizes the democratic and humanitarian tone that the author brings to all her linguistic work, and it is these qualities, combined with a lively style and subtle sense of humour – particularly appropriate in assessing the last dozen or so difficult years – that makes the book so enjoyable to read.

There are seventeen chapters, several of which are expanded versions of articles published earlier, a section entitled ‘Personalia. Reviews’ comprising six essays about people and books that have particularly caught the author’s attention, a bibliography of Professor Miačkouskaja’s publications between 1968 and 2008, and, finally but not least important, a list of the twenty dissertations completed under her supervision.

The first chapter is a review of publications in the journal *Bielaruskaja linhvistyka* (1996–1996) under the title ‘The modest charm of academism’, followed by an analysis of the paradoxes of Belarusian linguistic consciousness, in other words the miserably painful situation in which, whilst most Belarusians consider their language to be Belarusian, relatively few actually speak or even know it. Chapter 3, ‘Belarusians at the crossroads’, analyses the nature of national feeling in Belarus, including the oft-repeated question of the nationally conscious, ‘Why was our renaissance weaker than Ukraine’s?’ It is followed by a socio-linguistic look at the factors, brakes and priorities of this renaissance: the contents of a section on informational imperialism and the ‘imperial’ mentality of Belarusians will be clear to anyone who has visited a Belarusian bookshop during the past ten years, but reference to ‘club’ games for the enlightened, and linguistic aestheticism as a brake on the renaissance will probably raise a few hackles.

Chapter 5 discusses the attitudes of Belarusians towards their national identity compared with Russians, and the attitudes of Russians to the difference between Belarusians, Ukrainians and themselves. Like some other topics in this

book, there is much anecdotal evidence around this subject, but Professor Miačkouskaja brings wide-ranging scholarship to her dissection of, amongst other things, popular belief and prejudice. Similar themes are broached in the broadly titled ‘How do Belarusians differ from Russians?’, an entertaining and thought-provoking essay that not only assesses the psychological value and symbolism of the two languages in commercial and other settings. As the author wryly notes, the question in the title is of interest to Belarusians but not Russians. Chapter 7 continues the theme of linguistic symbolism, and is followed by a study of language amongst the priorities of the national renaissance; it is followed by an assessment of onomastics as a distinguishing factor between Belarus and its neighbours.

Chapter 10 is of less topical but broader Slavonic interest, followed by an assessment of the importance of orthographic changes in the history of Belarusian, Ukrainian, Polish and Russian. Chapter 12 discusses the linguistic situation in 20th-century Belarus and in particular the divergence of literary languages and convergences of dialects and demotic speech. Similarly thought provoking is the study of *trasianka* compared to Ukrainian *surzhuk* and their relationship to the literary languages. Chapter 14 assesses the socio-linguistic status of post-Soviet Russian particularly beyond the boundaries of Russia. It is followed by a study of the language of the *Naša niva* renaissance, and a discussion of gender aspects of ethno-linguistic conflicts in the 20th century. Chapter 17 returns to the question of *trasianka* in the continuum of Belarusian-Russian idiolects: who speaks *trasianka* and when?

This last question, like so many in this book, is of intense emotional concern to those who care for Belarus and its future. Professor Miačkouskaja raises such topics above the level of anguish to that of dispassionate scholarly observation, wise, humorous, lucid and with a breadth of lightly worn learning. Above all, this magisterial collection of essays reveals the author’s consummate skill as a teacher, valued by generations of pupils, and now made available for the enlightenment of a far wider audience.