



ISSN: 2158-7051

INTERNATIONAL  
JOURNAL OF  
RUSSIAN STUDIES

ISSUE NO. 11 ( 2022/2 )

## SINGING AND RUSSIAN AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE AMONG CANADIAN DOUKHOBORS

VERONIKA MAKAROVA\*

*In memory of my dear Doukhobor friends Peter Pereverzeff, Eli Popoff, and Peter Rezansoff.*

*Vechnaia pamiat' v tsarstvii nebesnom/eternal memory in heavenly kingdom*

### Summary

This paper examines the role of communal singing in the lives of Canadian Doukhobors, its connection with stories about the past, the role of singing in the communal life and the interactions with the heritage Russian language and its maintenance. The data comes from 54 interviews with Doukhobors conducted between 2012 and 2019. The methodology employed is based on Discourse Analysis of the interviews with manual themes extraction. The results of the study demonstrate that the three traditional forms of Doukhobor singing (psalms, hymns and folk songs) help to maintain the heritage Doukhobor Russian language. For many individuals in the community, this is the only remaining domain of Russian language use. The article proposes incorporating these genres in a language revitalization course for the community.

**Key Words:** Heritage language, Singing, Russian, Canadian Doukhobors, Endangered language, Language maintenance.

## Introduction

This article explores the role of singing in the lives of contemporary Doukhobors and the connections between singing in the ancestral (Russian) language and the language use by Canadian Doukhobors, as reported in interviews with the Doukhobor participants. Doukhobors (Doukhobortsy or Spirit Wrestlers) are a religious, ethnic and cultural minority who immigrated to Canada in 1899 to avoid persecutions in Russia for their anti-churchianism and pacifism including a refusal of doing military service (Tarasov, 1982). The original number of Doukhobors upon arrival was about 7,500 individuals. Due to intermarriages and lack of inflow of other Doukhobors from Russia in the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries, their numbers have dwindled. While the numbers of the descendants of the initial immigrant families could be as high as 30,000-40,000 by some estimates, the number of individuals who identify themselves as Doukhobors was 3800 according to Census 2001 (the last Canadian census which included “religion” question) and it further decreased over the last 20 years due to the aging population dynamics (Makarova, 2020). Most Canadian Doukhobors reside in British Columbia (BC) and a smaller group in Saskatchewan (SK), with the rest of the Doukhobors dispersed across the country.

The language spoken by Canadian Doukhobors was Doukhobor Russian, a variety of Russian formed on the basis of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Central and Southern Russian dialects plus some loan words from the languages of Transcaucasia and English as a lexifier in the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Makarova, 2019). Only some features of Doukhobor Russian (DR) have been described so far for the religious language of the psalms (Schaarshmidt, 2008) and contemporary conversational language (Makarova, 2019)

Russian used to be taught at schools at some points in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the areas of Doukhobor settlements in BC and Saskatchewan, but language teaching has been strongly reduced by the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Saskatchewan, Russian is not offered in any form at any educational levels. In BC, Russian is taught in a kindergarten in Castlegar run by the USCC (Union of the Spiritual Communities of Christ), the largest Doukhobor organization in Canada. Twin Rivers Elementary School in Castlegar offers a Russian immersion for a few grades, and University of British Columbia and University of Victoria offer Russian as a foreign language courses. Thus, there are very few opportunities for young Doukhobor learners to acquire some Russian even in the province where it is still spoken (BC).

Doukhobor Russian is still widely used in the community for reciting and choral singing of psalms (religious texts or prayers containing the essence of the Doukhobor teachings known as “The Living Book”) as well as for singing hymns or spiritual songs (songs on the subjects of Doukhobor beliefs and history) and folk songs (Makarova, 2017). This article focuses on the themes of Doukhobor singing and the role of heritage Russian language in it, as they are described by the community members in the interviews.

## Literature review

### Heritage languages

Heritage language is understood here in a broad sense as a language to which its speakers “have some family, ethnic or emotional connection” (Polinsky, 2018, p. 514). The Russian language was still acquired by the Doukhobors in naturalistic settings by the current generation in their

70s-90s who have a very high proficiency in the language and are bilingual in English and Russian. However, for middle-age and younger generations it is only an “ancestral” language in which they do not have a functioning proficiency.

Heritage language may retain its importance due to cultural and emotional connections, individual identities and diasporic ties (Belz, 2003; Fishman, 1991). On the other hand, a minority language can subject its speakers to “linguistic racism,” discrimination and alienation (Dovchin, 2019, p. 334). Despite this some minority communities are strongly committed to maintaining their language even if it is marginalized in the society (Meddegama, 2020).

Most studies of heritage languages are performed with the first to third generations since immigration (e.g., Kühn, et al. 2020; Sevinç & Backus, 2019; Tannenbaum & Peleg, 2020). Very few studies have examined heritage languages in subsequent generations due to the frequency of three-generational language shift in immigration (Holmes, 2013).

There is a significant body of research on Russian as an immigrant and heritage language (e.g., Antonova-Unlu et al., 2015; Isurin, 2011; Mustajoki et al., 2020). The retention rates for Russian as a heritage language are high across a number of different contexts (Isurin, 2011; Otwinowska-Kasztelanic et al., 2019). However, no studies so far have addressed Russian as a heritage language spoken by Canadian Doukhobors (who are 4-5<sup>th</sup> generation Russian language speakers since the original immigrant group) and the connections between language and music in this context.

## **Languages and music**

The bonds between music and language can be particularly strong in case of minority languages. For example, they can be expressed through songwriting in Sardinian in Italy (Jacobsen, 2019), listening to particular historic songs in Afrikaans by its speakers in South Africa (van der Waal & Robins, 2011), or through bilingual rap lyrics by Chinese Americans (Chen & Leung, 2018). In a study by Fung, (2017, p. 17), an ability to engage in church choir singing by Chinese Americans “preserved their ethnic languages, religious faith, and cultural heritage and promoted personal development and emotional well-being.”

Music and songs have therefore become a widely accepted tool in foreign and second language learning (e.g., Alisaari & Heikkola, 2018; Castelo, 2018; Rosowsky, 2010). In recent years, music and language connection has been employed for language retention. For example, some indigenous communities have found ways of attracting youth to learn their endangered languages through popular music genres sung in these languages (Ramsdell, 2020). Music and songs have been found motivating for different heritage language contexts, such as learners of Gaelic on Cape Breton island (Canada) (Macintyre, Baker & Sparling, 2017) and Greek in the UK (Charalambous & Yerosimou 2015). Some teachers and communities combine music, language, drama and dancing classes to teach heritage language and culture to children, e.g., Sri Lankan immigrants in Australia (Nethsinghe, 2009). To the best of our knowledge, connections between Doukhobor heritage language and music with perspectives for language retention have not been explored before.

## **Doukhobor choral singing**

The three major traditional genres of Doukhobor music are psalms (*psalmy*), hymns (*stikhi*) and folk songs (*pesni*) (Makarova, 2017). A capella singing is an intrinsic part of Doukhobor spiritual practice and lifestyle (Mealing, 1989). Doukhobor mass and group singing “remarkably preserved throughout the ages” has been called “soul expressive” (Popoff, 2005, p.1). Doukhobor choral

singing has attracted some attention in earlier research due to its “harmonic sophistication” and its reflection of Doukhobor beliefs not only via their words, but also through the togetherness of choral singing which is a manifestation of Doukhobor ideas of universal brotherhood (Peacock, 1966, p. 11-12).

The first and foremost function of Doukhobor choral singing is spiritual and social unity of the community (Mealing, 1989). Doukhobor sobranie (prayer services including the social part) and molenie (the spiritual part of the sobranie) included choral signing of psalms and hymns. At the end of the sobranie, some folk songs could be performed as well (Makarova, 2020).

### **Singing of the Psalms**

Doukhobor psalm called “Singing of the psalms” summarizes their spiritual significance:

The singing of psalms is an adornment to our souls. It brings angels to our help — drives away darkness, creates holiness, strength for the mind of man, effaces sin. ...It drives away sin, it teaches all, it reveals all, it honours the soul, it cleanses sense and gladdens the heart, it builds the high pillar, it enlightens man, it opens the senses, it destroys all evil, it reveals perfection. Serenity of mind — it is the proclamation of peace (Mealing, 1989, p. 54).

Psalms are prayers expressing Doukhobor beliefs that have been passed in the oral tradition through centuries. Some of the psalms were set to music, some were only recited, but not sung. Psalm texts include retold episodes from the Bible and New Testament; inspirational and instructional texts composed by the Doukhobor ancestors (17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries) and texts created by Doukhobor leaders to reflect their ideals and values. These Russian texts constitute the foundations of Doukhobor beliefs. About 400 Doukhobor psalms were transcribed and compiled into *The Living Book of the Doukhobors* by a Russian anthropologist Bonch-Bruevich (1909). Some later collections of psalms have been also published by the Doukhobor community in Canada (e.g., Kalmakoff, 1991).

The significance of Russian language psalms in Doukhobor culture has been pointed out in Mealing, 1989, and their multiple idiosyncratic music features have been examined in Perry, 1992. Psalms are also a unique Doukhobor communion with God, who according to Doukhobor worldview, is present in each person.

Psalmody includes an element of improvisation, a freedom for a singer to form one’s own harmony to compliment others. Psalms are sung extremely slowly with one syllable stretched to multiple bars of music; therefore, singing just a few words can take 10-15 minutes (Peacock, 1966; Makarova, 2017). The first of multiple explanations of this tradition is their origin in very old medieval music (Peacock, 1966, p. 16). Another explanation is that the vowels were deliberately stretched out to prevent the authorities from understanding the heretical meanings of the psalms (Perry, 1992). Mark Mealing (1989, p. 118) suggests that Doukhobor psalms are rooted in the lost Russian Orthodox Znamennoe chanting tradition. One more explanation attributes the origins of the psalms to the impact of Buddhist mantras passed through Doukhobors of Kalmyk ethnic origin (Psalmist Project). E. Popoff (2005, p.1) relates the stories of psalms origins from the “ancient ritual of the chanting of funeral dirges” and their use at the “times of persecutions of the early Christians.” In any case, Doukhobor psalmody is an ancient unique tradition and its origins are clad in mystery.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, singing of psalms has been discontinued in Saskatchewan, and their function was replaced by reciting psalms and other prayers and singing hymns. In a larger Doukhobor community of British Columbia, psalms are still sung, although the number of performed psalms has decreased from hundreds (in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) to about thirty

nowadays (Makarova, 2017). Thanks to a group of BC Doukhobor enthusiasts, psalm singing tradition is being continued, although longer psalms are not sung in their entirety, but only the first few lines. A Psalmist project also contributed to preserving them (Psalmist Project). USCC (the largest group of Doukhobors in Canada) encourages psalmists and started a tradition of sending a few records of hymns and psalms to its members once a week by e-mail.

The language of the psalms is archaic, and employs words and expressions from church Slavonic as well as 17-19<sup>th</sup> century Russian forms, it is therefore not easy to understand (Schaarshmidt, 2008).

Hymns are much more contemporary from the viewpoint of history, musicology and lyrics. Some of them were composed by the Doukhobor ancestors in Russia, some are shared with other Christian sects. There are hymns celebrating Doukhobor history in Russia and in Canada. A few hymns were composed by Doukhobor leaders (Perry, 1992). In addition, the author adds to this classification a group of hymns which have lyrics that came from works by Russian poets.

The tradition of Doukhobor hymnody (as well as of folk singing) was reformed a few times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reforms included changing to 4-part harmony and organizing choirs that performed the hymns and songs in public (Tarasoff, 1982). These activities swung the singing of hymns over the psalms.

Folk songs are of Russian (mainland) origin, and there is little specificity about them. There was a considerable cultural exchange in mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century with Russia, with choirs from both sides travelling across, record exchange, etc. Some Russian songs lyrics have been changed to represent Doukhobor beliefs (Makarova, 2017).

Solo singing does happen at Doukhobor events nowadays, but is not very common. At festivals and community events, one can hear small group singing as well (duos, trios, quartets, male choirs, women choirs, etc.).

While there have been a few studies of Doukhobor music and of Doukhobor language cited above, there has been no investigation of the connection between Doukhobor singing and heritage Russian language as they are expressed by community members. This study is aimed at pursuing this connection. The research questions of the study are:

What is the significance of signing for the participants?

How did the Doukhobors learn singing?

What is the value of Russian language in connection to singing?

What are the participants' perspectives on singing and language retention?

## **Materials and Methods**

This paper reports the results of an analysis of 57 semi-structured interviews conducted by the author between 2012 and 2018 with Doukhobor community members. The average length of the interviews was 43 minutes; the average age of participants was 77 (with a range between 10 to 96 years old). The interviews were originally conducted with two purposes: to obtain samples of Doukhobor Russian and to explore community values. The participants were not restricted to the research questions, and they were free to talk about anything that interested them. There were no research questions about Doukhobor music, but the themes of singing emerged in the descriptions of childhood memories, knowledge learnt from parents, Doukhobor beliefs, and Russian language maintenance. Transcripts of interviews were manually coded by the researcher (employing Discourse Analysis thematic coding techniques - Waring, 2017). The interviews were conducted in

the preferred language of the participants – Russian or English and are presented here in the translations to English due to article length limitations. BEH 09-156 approval (University of Saskatchewan) was obtained, and all the research protocols were followed.

### RESULTS Part 1. Singing

In this section, we summarize the singing-related themes that were brought up by participants. Singing was the third most frequent theme in participants’ interviews after pacifism and Doukhobor beliefs. There was a total of 106 occurrences of the singing theme in the interviews of 57 participants. The average number of the theme occurrences was 1.85 (SD=2.38), 40 participants (70%) talked about singing at least once, and 17 participants (30%) did not mention it at all. The summary of the frequencies of singing-related themes are represented in Figure 1. Most participants talked about Doukhobor singing once or twice, and one participant brought up the topic of singing 14 times.

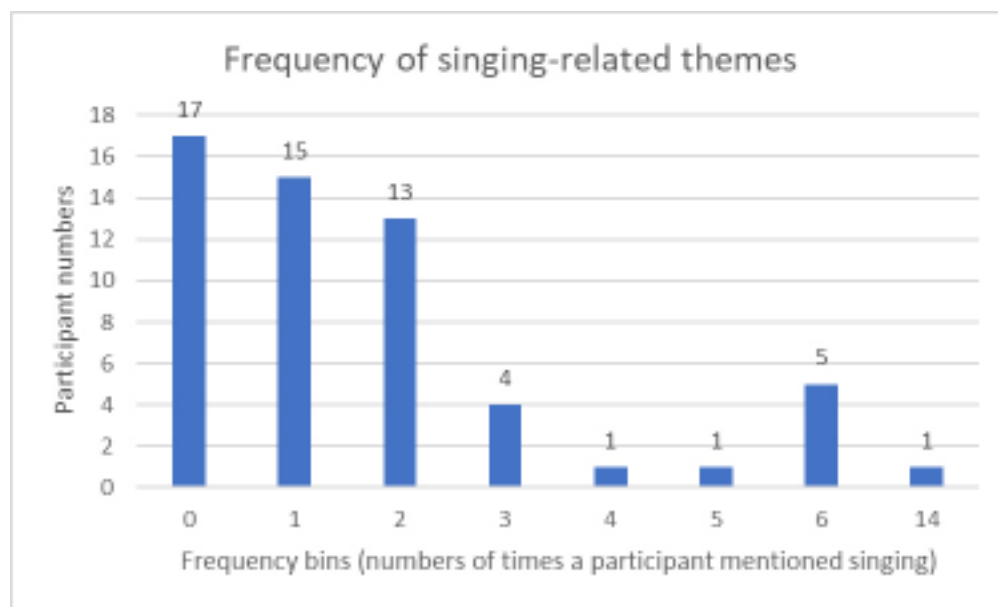


Figure 1. Frequencies of the themes of Doukhobor singing in participants’ interviews.

### Doukhobor singing and history

The interviews demonstrate that singing is a part of Doukhobor stories (“pabaski”). According to one of them, an old wedding hymn “There goes a young man crying bitterly” relates the story of the emergence of the concept of the “Living book” as it was revealed to one of the founders of Doukhoborism (BC13-26).

One participant brought up the story of connection between the Doukhobors and the Russian tsar Alexander I, who is believed by the Doukhobors to have been impacted by their singing and beliefs. The story suggests that one of the Doukhobor and Russian Cossack’s songs “Oh, a Cossack was killed in Taganrog” is related to the legends surrounding tsar Alexander I’s death in 1825 (BC13-30).

Singing of the psalms accompanied all the important life events in Doukhobor history, such as their moving to Canada:

Father came from Russia, when he was only 12, and he told us that as they travelled on board the ship, they thought the ship would sink, it was too bad, the waves were huge, and everyone was very scared. And our people, whether they were scared or not, they were singing right there that we would soon arrive in Canada. Singing of the psalms was a major thing for them, and they brought many psalms from Russia (SK1).

### **Doukhobor beliefs encrypted in psalms and hymns**

Talking about the most important features of Doukhoborism, the participants mentioned that they are expressed in psalms and hymns. For example, commenting on “thou shall not kill” commandment, a participant mentioned that this message was conveyed through singing:

And in our hymns we sing about this, our people were uneducated, but how well they knew Russian, what hymns they were composing, what message they passed over to people about their beliefs, how they suffered, and this is very important for me (SK4).

Although Doukhobor singing is important, as one participant reminded, they are less important than following Doukhobor principles of living a good life and being nice to others:

Doukhobors believe that the most important things are not to bow, not to sing, - all these are secondary rites. But the most important thing, is so that other people could live with you, this is important (BC13-26)

Moreover, singing was also a method of transmitting at least some of these beliefs or at least some awareness of Doukhobors and their message to the outsiders through choir performances:

We participate a lot in Miltifaith, where they have different religions’ choirs – Catholics, Muslims, Sikhs, and we perform our hymns. And we were invited as Doukhobors (SK4).

### **Singing as a part of prayer services**

Singing has always been an indispensable part of Sobranie (prayer services) practice. The service structure emerged in Canada, as described by a participant from BC:

First, all the men will read the psalms, and then all the women, and then they and the elder select which psalms they want to sing. Then they sing, and then there is conversation, about the psalm, beliefs, all sort of talk (BC18C-17).

### **Singing as a part of rites and mysticism**

All major life’s events (marriages, funerals) were accompanied by the singing of the psalms and hymns. As one participant described a part of a traditional wedding ceremony: “Then everyone will read and sing Our Lord’s prayer” (BC13-25).

Psalms had deep spiritual and mystical meanings as well: they were supposed to protect and guide not only the souls of the living, but the souls of the dead as well.

Even nowadays, we still have funerals in British Columbia. And I was told that one has to recite and sing three psalms, and then sing one hymn. Only then your soul is ready to depart, but the soul is around six months, maybe. It is around us (BC18C-09).

This traditional view that singing of the psalms is required for the soul transitioning to afterlife was criticized by another participant: “How bad does the funeral need to be for the soul not to get to heaven?” (BS13-26)

## **Singing as a part of lifestyle**

According to multiple participant interviews, the singing tradition was very much a part of everyday life:

We heard some stories about gatherings in Russia. Some of our elders remember how they got together, how they sang in the yards on benches, they started it this way for us not to forget, and because there were no room in the houses (SK10-1).

Singing was also an intrinsic part of entertaining at “vičirinki” (evening parties), and en-route:

And I remember they had parties there, and they played Russian accordion, and sang. It was fun listening to them and to feel that we are all together (BC18-05).

And when we walk to the choir [rehearsal], we all get together and walk, sometimes we speak about Doukhoborchestvo, about God, and we sing. It was so much fun (BC18-05).

Some simple daily life activities, such as guests’ appearance, also required singing:

If we had guests, we would sing the prayer “Guests”. This a psalm which is called “Guests”. We had a hymn or a song or a psalm for every life’s occasion. And we were ceremonial this way.

Singing was also a favorite pass-time during holidays:

They gathered for Christmas too, on Sunday evening. They may play cards or sing, or eat seeds [sunflower]. This is how they spent time (SK-5)

Having a good voice and remembering many psalms and hymns among the Doukhobors was a “social grace” and a matter of individual, family or group pride. A few participants spoke fondly of their older relatives who could remember many psalms:

My aunt lived here, she died at the age of 90, and she said “well I got a bit older, I knew 70 hymns by heart, and now I am old and can only remember 50 (SK4).

In 1930s as well as in 1950-s-60s and later in 1980s, many Doukhobor choirs were organized that performed all over Canada and even abroad. Choir singing was a part of lifestyle of many Doukhobors, who “went singing all over” (SK1). Doukhobor women took a major role in organizing choir performances, as noted by one participant: “there are women in the community that take leadership roles in organizing: choir directors, for example, coordinating trips. Our choirs have gone to New York, to Russia, wherever” (BC18C-16).

For a few Doukhobors, psalmody still remains a way of life. A total of six participants mentioned that they are “psalmopevtsy” (psalm singers)

I go to psalm singing on Wednesdays, we go to practice psalm singing in the evening. And on Sundays we go to molenie (prayer service) (BC18-22).

It should be noted that “spontaneous singing” is still very much a part of elderly Doukhobor lifestyle. Three interviews ended up with singing of Doukhobor hymns and folk songs by participants with the author happily joining in.

## **Learning the psalms texts and singing**

The interviewees gave examples of how the singing of the psalms (as well as hymns and songs) was memorized from early childhood. Children first learnt to recite psalms and then sing them from parents and grandparents in the family:

And then we were with grandmother, and I learnt a lot, she taught me how to write in Russian and she sang a lot, she even sang psalms alone, and I often heard how she sang

(GF30)

I my vot s mamaj, s papaj, i s bratami časta peli duxaborčeskie stixi i psalmy.

And we often sang Doukhobor hymns and psalms with mother, father, and brothers (GF19).

Children continued singing “acquisition” or experiential learning in the community. It was picked up in prayer services, and also during holidays and “singing” parties in the Doukhobor neighborhoods:

And of course we learned when they sang at sobranija, we learnt the hymns on the spot, we memorized them as we heard them (BC13-19)

We had interest groups, and we learned to sing and the psalms. (BC18O28).

Some participants spoke about singing in public from early childhood:

I remember when she [the older sister] was standing on a table and sang for Verigin [P.P. Verigin, a Doukhobor leader], and we stood with [the other] sister, and sang harmonizing with her, when we were 8 years old” (SK 4).

As described by participants, the psalms melody was extremely complex and involved lots of memorization:

Because one psalm has 29 parts. How do you write them down? There is no way. Everything was learnt by heart. And now nobody remembers, we have to read them (SK 3)

### **Emotional response to Doukhobor singing**

A few participants (5) mentioned that listening to Doukhobor singing in Russian was uplifting and made them feel better:

And they [grandparents] sang the psalms a lot, and when you hear the words, it feels good to live in this world (SK1.)

When we sing the Lord’s prayer...I goose-bumped just thinking about it. It is something very powerful. You can feel this energy about, you know. It’s almost like it’s hugging everybody (BC18C07).

One participant metaphorically described the feeling of togetherness and transcendence arising from Doukhobor singing:

I love this singing. And I feel that when we sing like this together, it is as if we are all weaving a fabric, every person who sings higher or lower, and different voices, it is as if we are weaving a fabric. And I think that singing together with others makes us listen to each other, and this is a part of society, it is not all about me, bit about how to work together (GF19).

## **Results Part 2. Heritage language**

In this section we will consider participants’ responses to questions related to Russian language maintenance and the connections between the language and the singing tradition. Out of a total of 38 participants who answered the question about functions of the Russian language, 19 respondents (50%) named “Doukhobor singing” (the most frequent response).

Forty five participants answered a question whether Russian language can be maintained or not; 37 (82%) of them answered positively, and 8 (8%) negatively. Forty three participants were asked about the importance of Russian language for them, of those 33 (76% participants) indicated that they had an emotional connection with the language. Most participants said that their parents taught them Russian: 35 respondents (85%) from a group of 41 participants. Thirty eight (97% of 39) participants mentioned that they taught Russian to their children, but of these 28 participants (out of

38) explained that their children did not speak Russian despite being taught it in childhood. Forty seven (84%) of 56 participants regret the loss of Russian in the community.

### **Singing in Russian**

One participant talked about Doukhorbor singing creating a motivation and an environment for practicing Russian:

We gathered for singing, and I did not speak Russian all that well, and I did not read, but you sing one song, and then you sing it once again, and then it got stuck in my memory.

And when I go to the sobranie, to singing rehearsals, whichever older women are there, it is always interesting when we speak Russian. They feel good about it. During sobranie we always speak in English, but when we sit down to sing – it is in Russian, and we talk a lot about different things. (SK 4)

### **The loss of meaning and the loss of language**

According to one participant, understanding psalm texts was a very important part of Doukhorborism, as emphasized by the Doukhorbor leaders P.P. Verigin and J. J Verigin the Elder:

Peter Petrovich and Ivan Ivanych repeated the following: “You, he says, should know what exactly the essence of Doukhorborism is, in the psalms, whether you sing a hymn or read a psalm, what does it mean and why it appeared amongst the Doukhorbors? And if you do not know this, then you are only acting following routine (BC13-26 ).

According to the participants, since 1970s-1980s, the use of Russian in the community was on the decline. Even if Russian were acquired, it was forgotten when the children left for studies or work elsewhere. This created an issue with understanding the meaning of psalms, hymns and songs. One participant described the way she addressed it through explanations and translation:

We decided this way: if we are going to teach psalms to the children, they have to understand what they mean, and we had to explain almost every word to them. ...So every Sunday morning, we went and taught them, we explained things to children. And it was very interesting for them. We translate for them in English what it means, and they understand English, so when you explain to them, they understand what they are signing about (BC13-21).

### **Erosion of Doukhorbor traditions and heritage language use**

Some participants’ comments about Doukhorbor culture continuity were very pessimistic:

“Doukhorborism as we know it is either finishing or has ended. No matter where you turn, there are no Russian schools for children, no children’s sobranie, psalm singing is very weak. The older grandmas and grandpas are dying. Here there are some old timers who know psalmody well, but still, many psalms that were frequently sung before are no longer sung, because they try to select the ones which are easier” (BC18O27).

In Saskatchewan, the singing of psalms has been discontinued for decades, as there are not enough people left who remember how to sing psalms (SK 4). One participant said that she could ‘sing along’ with a recording, but did not know and could not direct who should “go” where melodically. Not only the singing of the psalms is disappearing, but the reading of the psalms too: “now we have many prayers in English” (SK3).

The disuse of Russian is explained by multiple reasons, such as inability for others

(non-Doukhobors) to understand it:

When we did the vigil or funerals, everything was in Russian. People came, but they did not understand. Of course, the singing is good, people always like listening to singing, but they did not understand what we were saying, and we started explaining that this is what we are saying, and then people started understanding us. (SK3).

Young people were getting away to get education, sometimes finding other religions to follow, as there were no Doukhobor communities in other locations where they moved to:

Then they all studied in Vancouver. They did not have Doukhobors there. Our eldest daughter studied in Alberta. She found a new church there and that was it. And she sang until she was 18-19 years old, everything in Russian, and then she forgot it all, and that was it (BC13-21).

Poor or insufficient teaching and learning of Russian were also blamed for the language decline:

And I think with my peer group that's what happened because they took the Russian in school they didn't do the after-school Russian, they didn't come to Sunday school regularly and then they lost Russian (GF25).

I-phones, Internet and other IT gadgets may be contributing to distracting youngsters from learning ...pretty much anything:

There are a lot of youngsters on the Internet. That's all they want - it's the Internet. We were in Kelowna, and there were two high school students there. And there was a big concern: nobody wanted to study, and they only want to be on their telephones (GF-6).

Increasing numbers of intermarriages also caused the disruptions in continuity of Doukhobor traditions. As a participant explained, her son married a woman from another religion, and started going to his wife's church, but was occasionally "running away" to sing during Doukhobor sobranie, as he had a "good high voice" (SK4)

### **Is there a hope for continuity?**

Counteracting the gloomy visions of the future, a few participants related some existing interest among young people in singing in Russian, or audio recording psalms and hymns:

And we have many young people who come over, they do not know Russian, but they want to sing in Russian. They do not want to lose the language. It is difficult for them to articulate the words, but they still want to, they feel that there is something very good here, beautiful Russian, wonderful Russian language. They do not want to lose it. (SK 4).

Multiple measures to save Russian have been undertaken by the Doukhobor community of BC, for example, Russian is introduced in the USCC-run kindergarten open for non-Doukhobor children where a part of the program is listening to Doukhobor songs (BC18C-20). A Sunday children's sobranie is also held along with Sunday school, "so we will continue a little where possible" (GF25). As the Sunday School teacher reports,

In the last two years, Sunday school has been very successful. Even though we are a small group. It doesn't matter, we can still read, we can still sing, the elders are so wonderful. I think most kids have five psalms, maybe more that they know now.... The kids they are singing louder they are singing more, so I think that was the best thing that we did. (GF25)

Some participants emphasized the importance of Russian for the understanding of the psalms: For me it is important to know Doukhobor language as well as I can, it means a better understanding of Doukhobor teachings. And when we sing different hymns, psalms, because I think that in this, in all languages, there are their own vibrations, different vibrations and different feelings (GF19).

Another participant passionately supported keeping Russian:

It's who we are. Once you lose that, then you're not going to understand the psalms. So Russian goes hand-in-hand with Doukhoborism. (GF25)

Yet another participant was pessimistic about the future of Russian language maintenance painting a picture of language shift:

I am very interested in the words and knowing what I am singing, and being able to speak. But others, they follow their own path, they will live with the English [Canadians], and they would only be able to tell their children: our grandmother spoke Russian. And my grandmother, she lived and died without knowing English, and my children will grow up, get old and die without the Russian language. And this is how it will go who knows, until what time. And I do not know whether anything happens some day that it will become important for them to know [Russian] (SK4).

Participants named many activities undertaken in the community to keep the traditions and singing. An intergenerational group was created to teach crafts, meaningful life skills. A group of young Doukhobors set to music the words of one psalm that did not exist in the melodic form "Uteshi menja Gospodi" (Comfort me, my Lord) (GF19). Many members of the community participated in the creation of <https://doukhobormusic.ca/> cite which contains records of dozens (if not hundreds) of Doukhobor hymns, psalms and songs.

Some participants see a possibility of continuity without the heritage language:

I love Russian very much, and I would like for it to stay. But even if we lose it, I think that not everything will be lost. We can continue in English. This will be difficult for us. And the meaning is lost sometimes. But I think we can still continue (BC18C-31).

One participant points out that even with some knowledge of Russian, the language of the psalms is too old, it is "a museum piece of language". Moreover, there is "a conceptual gap between that quite ancient Christian way of viewing the world and life, and how we view it now...." and sees a solution in poetic re-rendering of Doukhobor psalms in translations (BC18-06-2).

## Discussion

As evidenced by the results, the community is facing the issues of psalms retention and well as heritage Russian retention as a part of an overall problem of survival and continuity. Doukhobor community is certainly not the only group tackling these issues. For example, for many American Molokans and Jumpers, heritage Russian has also retained one domain of the religious gatherings and singing, and young people do not understand Russian (Mazo, 2008). Many young people who do not comprehend the language have been leaving (Mazo, 2008).

Music is known to be a powerful tool of carrying religious (or other ideological) messages, as it was used, for example, by Christian missionaries (Fung, 2017). It has a role in uniting a community and creating its shared meaning, it adds spirituality, creates the effect of belonging and transcending self, has a healing effect, and improves physical and psychological well-being (Boyce-Tillman 2007; Fung, 2017). Music in other contexts helps heritage language speakers to express spirituality, reconnect with faith, ethnic languages and cultural heritage (Fung, 2017).

In turn, language is one of the "building blocks" of ethnic and religious identities (Nagel, 2014:152) as shown, for example, by the case of Hebrew maintenance through millennia. Language also has a unifying effect on the community. It appears therefore that music and language could also be the foundations of rebuilding the community. Many participants have a strong emotional connection with their heritage language and music, as is typical of heritage singing in general (Mazo,

2008).

The results of the study confirms and extends an earlier finding that Doukhobor singing is “one of the most important tools and motivators of the maintenance of the Russian language” (Makarova, 2017, p. 34). Singing hymns, psalms and songs remains the only domain of heritage Russian language use among young Doukhobors and even among many older ones.

The findings demonstrate that the memories of the original hymns and songs tradition reforms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are still a part of the individual and collective Doukhobor memory. This process brought the traditional harmony change and an emergence of a new tradition of public choir singing and performance (Tarasoff, 1982) that the participants are proud of. By contrast, psalmody has remained true to the ancient ways, but is strongly endangered, with only a few psalms still performed by small groups of psalmists in British Columbia. We also see that the singing of hymns and even reciting psalms in Russian is decreasing in the community due to discontinuation of Russian in the younger generations. Natural maintenance of the language is no longer possible, since it is near-extinct and only (great-)grandparents generation can speak it, so there are practically no opportunities for children to learn the language at home.

Moreover, singing of the psalms and hymns in Russian during prayer services and funerals isolates Doukhobors who do not understand Russian, as well as non-Doukhobors who may be present. An increased inability to understand or speak Russian among the Doukhobors makes them disconnected from the messages encrypted in the texts they are singing. Thus, a heritage language may be seen as a “stick with two ends”: on the one hand, it has a unifying and motivating effect and on the other – “fallout”.

Suggested counter-measures of “explaining” and “translating” are not a panacea either, as they transfer some of the meanings, but deprive the Doukhobors of fully understanding the multiple polysemic meaning imbedded in the psalms, and cause misinterpretations of texts in translations and “rewriting” the fundamentals of the beliefs. A few participants expressed a strong likelihood of the spiritual tradition continuing in English. This shift may be happening already, as one member of Saskatchewan community composed two hymns in English (Makarova, 2020).

Yet, some participants indicate that a will still exists among younger Doukhobor generation to learn the psalms and hymns in the original language. Heritage passions, and heritage convictions interact with language learner motivation (Macintyre, Baker and Sparling, 2017). Therefore, there is still an opportunity for language and singing culture revitalization that would go hand-in-hand. Language teachers have found songs highly beneficial for language learning, particularly for pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, topic introduction and motivation (Alisaari & Heikkola, 2017; Leśniewska & Pichette, 2016).

The author suggests that the solution could be somewhere in the middle. First, the community needs a cultural revitalization plan along the lines suggested by participants. A part of it could be Russian language revitalization. Since the community has no resources for Russian language teaching/learning, the project would need volunteers. The author is developing a Russian hybrid (standard Russian with elements of Doukhobor Russian) course for the community to be implemented in spring 2022. It will not be sufficient, but it could be a start of a movement towards language revitalization that the community, teachers of Russian and Russian immigrants as well as Russians in the mainland could assist as well.

### ***Limitations***

The interviews did not focus directly on interactions between singing in Russian and language

maintenance, thus the scope of extracted data was limited. A more focused study of the attitudes of Doukhobors of different generations to their music genres is warranted.

### **Conclusion**

Canada is one of the most linguistically diverse and multiethnic countries, and yet, many groups fail to maintain their language and ethnic or other identity features over time (Pendakur & Hennebry, 1998). Doukhobors have managed to retain their identity and language for over 100 years, but their future as a group is being debated and they are very close to losing their heritage Russian language. The role of heritage language is somewhat controversial, according to the participants. On the one hand, knowledge of the language is conducive of the understanding of the beliefs, and on the other hand, the younger generations can be scared off by the heritage language that has become “foreign” for them.

Choral singing is an important part of Doukhobor beliefs and traditions, and it remains the last domain of Russian language use among Doukhobors. As the singing of psalms is diminishing in the community, so does the need for Russian, and the other way round, the decreased Russian language use lowers the possibility of psalmody and hymnody survival. Many hymns have been translated into English, and some of them are sung in English, particularly in Saskatchewan, where the community is smaller and the language loss is more profound.

Russian remains attractive to some community members who have an emotional connection with it. It reflects and expresses Doukhobor history and cultural heritage, it is a medium for Doukhobor beliefs (through psalms and hymns). It also motivates some young Doukhobors to learn the language. Singing hymns and songs in Russian as a “choir performance” is well received by the public.

A complete disappearance of Russian may cause Doukhoborism to lose their distinct identity, and in this way accelerate the group dispersion. Revitalizing Russian in the community, as suggested by some participants, would help matters, but only if this teaching leads to high levels of Russian speaking and reading proficiency. Even so, the difficult and archaic language of the psalms would need to be professionally explained in bilingual publications with page notes.

Hopefully, Russian language learning and Doukhobor cultural revival could enrich and support each other. While the ethnolinguistic prognosis for the language and culture maintenance does not look very promising, Doukhobors have surprised the world so many times before by their resilience, and perhaps there is still a hope that the young generation could decide to carry on their heritage perhaps in some new exciting ways, as their heritage is *the Living Book* after all, which means an ever-evolving tradition.

### **Acknowledgements**

This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

### **Bibliography**

Alisaari, J., & Heikkola, L. M. (2017). Songs and poems in the language classroom: Teachers’ beliefs and practices. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 63, 231–242.

<https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.1016/j.tate.2016.12.021>

- Antonova-Unlu, E., Simsek, C., Atesman, E., & Lozovska, A. (2015). Russian immigrant diaspora in Turkey: Language use, preference and attitudes. *Turkish Studies*, 16(3), 391–410.
- Belz, J. A. (2003). Identity, deficiency and first language use in foreign language education. In C. Blyth (ed.) *The Sociolinguistics of Foreign-language Classrooms: Contributions of the Native, the Near-native and the Non-native Speaker* (pp. 209–250). Heinle Thomson.
- Bonch-Bruevich, Vladimir D. (1909). *Zhivotnaiakniga dukhobortsev* [Book of Life of the Doukhobors]. St. Petersburg.
- Boyce-Tillman, J. (2007). Spirituality in the Musical Experience. In L. Bresler (Ed.) *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (1405–24). Springer Netherlands Press.
- Castelo, A. (2018). Songs for Teaching Pronunciation: A Guiding Model. *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education & Didactics*, 22(1), 7–22.
- Charalambous, C. and Yerosimou, M. (2015). Drama, Music and Media in Heritage Language Learning. *Journal of Education, Culture & Society*, 2, 370–381.  
<https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.15503/jecs20152.370.381>
- Chen, M., & Leung, G. (2018). (Re)Writing Contemporary Cantonese Heritage Language and Identity. *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 41(3), 550–567.  
<https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.1353/bio.2018.0058>
- Dovchin, S. (2019). Language crossing and linguistic racism: Mongolian immigrant women in Australia. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 14(4), 334–351.
- Fishman, J. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Multilingual Matters.
- Fung, A. (2017). A Chinese Faith-Based Inclusive Choir in the US: Exploring the Shared Journey of Conductors and Singers. *International Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Society*, 7(4), 17–32.  
<https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v07i04/17-32>
- Holmes, J. (2013). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.
- Isurin, L. (2011). Russian diaspora: Culture, identity and language change. De Gruyter.
- Jacobsen, K. M. (2019). Someone Else’s “Country”: American Roots Music and Rural Identity in Sardinia, Italy. *Journal for the Anthropology of North America*, 22(2), 82–85.  
<https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.1002/nad.12121>
- Kalmakoff, N. (1991). *Dukhovnyestikhi i narodnye pesni dukhobortsev v Kanade* [Religious Verses/Hymns and Folksong of the Doukhobors in Canada]. Richmond, B.C.
- Kühl, K., Petersen, J. H., Hansen, G. F. (2020). The Corpus of American Danish: a language resource of spoken immigrant Danish in North and South America. *Language Resources & Evaluation*, 54(3), 831–849.
- Leśniewska, J., & Pichette, F. (2016). Songs vs. stories: impact of input sources on ESL vocabulary acquisition by preliterate children. *International Journal of Bilingual Education & Bilingualism*, 19(1), 18–34.  
<https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.1080/13670050.2014.960360>
- Macintyre, P.D., Baker S.C. and Sparling H. (2017), *Heritage Passions, Heritage Convictions, and the Rooted L2 Self: Music and Gaelic Language Learning in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia*. *The Modern Language Journal*, 101, 501–516.  
<https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.1111/modl.12417>
- Makarova, V. (2020) Evolution of the contemporary Doukhobor sobranie practice in Saskatchewan. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 52(1), 95–117.

- Makarova, V. (2019) Ex-neuter-gender nouns in Canadian Doukhobor Russian. *Russian Linguistics* 43, 273–287.
- Makarova, V. (2017). Choral music in Doukhobor rituals and community life in Saskatchewan, Canada. *International Journal of Russian Studies*, 6(1), 28-37.
- Mazo, M. (2008) Singing as Experience among Russian American Molokans. In P. V. Bohlman; E. W. Blumhofer; M. M Chow (Eds.); *Music in American Religious Experience*. Oxford University Press Online.  
DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195173048.003.0006
- Mealing, F. Mark. 1989. On Doukhobor Psalms. *Canadian Literature* 120: 117-32.
- Nagel, J. (2014) Constructing ethnicity: creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture. *Social Problems* 41 (1), 152–176.
- Meddegama, I. V. (2020). Cultural values and practices: the pillars of heritage language maintenance endeavours within an immigrant multilingual Malayali community in the UK. *International Journal of Bilingual Education & Bilingualism*, 23(6), 643-656.
- Nethsinghe, R. (2009). To the land of the Tea Trees from the Island of Tea: A learning experience in performing arts for children of Sri Lankan community in Melbourne. *Victorian Journal of Music Education*, 12(1), 19–28.
- Mustajoki, A., Protassova, E. and Yelenevskaya, M. (Eds.). (2020). *The Soft Power of the Russian Language: Pluricentricity, Politics and Policies*. Routledge.
- Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, A., Meir, N., Ringblom, N., Karpava, S. and La Morgia, F. (2019). Language and literacy transmission in heritage language: evidence from Russian-speaking families in Cyprus, Ireland, Israel and Sweden. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1–26.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1695807>.
- Peacock, K. (1966). *Twenty ethnic songs from Western Canada*. Ottawa: Roger Duhamel.
- Pendakur, R. and Henneby, J. (1998). *Multicultural Canada: A Demographic overview*. Ottawa.
- Popoff, E. (2005). *The Soul Expressive Heritage of The Doukhobors -Russian Group Singing*.  
<http://www.usccdoukhobors.org/culture/doukhobor-group-singing.htm>
- Perry, S. M. (1992). *Selected Psalms, Old Verses and Spiritual Songs of the Canadian Doukhobors: Transcription and Musical Analysis*. Ph.D. diss. (Music), University of Arizona.
- Polinsky, M. (2018) Bilingual children and adult language speakers: the range of comparison. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 22 (5), 547–563.
- Psalms Project <http://doukhobor-museum.org/exhibits/the-psalmist-project/>
- Ramsdell, L. (2020). Language retention through music in two Afrodescendant communities of Latin America: Garífuna Punta Rock and Palenquero Champeta. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 29(3), 445–459.  
<https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.1080/>
- Rosowsky, A. (2010). “Writing it in English”: script choices among young multilingual Muslims in the UK. *Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development*, 31(2), 163–179.  
<https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.1080/01434630903514204>
- Sevinç, Y, & Backus, A. (2019). Anxiety, language use and linguistic competence in an immigrant context: a vicious circle? *International Journal of Bilingual Education & Bilingualism*, 22(6), 706-724.
- Schaarschmidt, G. (2008). The Ritual language of the British Columbia Doukhobors. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 50(1-2), 101-122.
- Tannenbaum, M. & Peleg, G. (2020). Language and identity among Iranian immigrants in Israel.

Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development, 41(9), 764-778.

Tarasoff, Koozma, 1982. Plakun trava: The Doukhobors. Mir Publication Society.

van der Waal, K. S., & Robins, S. (2011). 'De la Rey' and the Revival of 'Boer Heritage'. Journal of Southern African Studies, 37(4), 763–779.

<https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.1080/03057070.2011.617219>

Waring, H. Z. (2017). Discourse Analysis: The Questions Discourse Analysts Ask and how they Answer them. Routledge.

---

\***Veronika Makarova** - Professor, Department of Linguistics, University of Saskatchewan  
email: [v.makarova@usask.ca](mailto:v.makarova@usask.ca)