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# Revitalization of Russian among Canadian Doukhobors through a community course

This article explores pedagogical, linguistic, and cultural issues involved in designing a community Russian language course for Doukhobors in Canada. To date, only limited descriptions of the Doukhobors' language use and structure are available, showing that they speak, first and foremost, Doukhobor Russian (DR), a severely endangered variety, which is currently maintained by only a few dozen elderly bilinguals whose dominant language is English, but who retain fluent proficiency in DR. Second, some of the community members speak idiolects which align somewhere along a continuum between DR and Standard Russian (StR). However, the use of any kind of Russian is rapidly diminishing in the community. To support the revitalization of the Doukhobors' heritage language varieties, an online community Russian language course for adult Doukhobors is being developed. The article discusses key considerations in designing the course, including pedagogical approaches, choice of language variety to teach (StR or DR), and the selection of culturally significant topics and materials for inclusion. The article proposes a bilingual approach exposing learners to both DR and StR, and outlines a range of culturally relevant themes for the course. The article contributes to the topic of critically endangered minority languages.

Keywords: Doukhobor Russian, language revitalization, community course design, culture in heritage language teaching

В настоящей статье рассматриваются вопросы педагогики, лингвистики, и культуры, связанные с разработкой курса русского языка для общины духоборцев в Канаде. На сегодняшний день существует лишь ограниченное количество описаний структуры и использования языка канадских духоборцев (или духоборов), которые показывают, что во-первых, они говорят на духоборческом русском (ДР) варианте, находящемся под угрозой исчезновения, так как в настоящее время им владеют лишь несколько десятков пожилых билингвов, у которых английский язык доминирует, но они сохраняют беглость в ДР. Во-вторых, некоторые члены общины говорят на идиолектах, которые вписываются в рамки континуума между ДР и стандартным (нормативным) современным русским языком (СР). В целом, использование каких бы то ни было вариантов русского языка резко сокращается в общине. В целях поддержки возрождения языка духоборческого наследия разрабатывается курс русского языка для взрослых духоборцев. Статья охватывает ключевые моменты в разработке курса, включая методологию, выбор языкового варианта (СР или ДР), а также набор тем и языковых материалов, отражающих духоборческие ценности. В статье предлагаются двуязычный подход к вариантам языка (СР и ДР) и набор тем, имеющих культурное значение для сообщества духоборцев. Статья актуальна для других исчезающих языков меньшинств.

Ключевые слова: духоборческий русский язык, возрождение языка, разработка языкового курса для общины, преподавание языков наследия



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## 1. Introduction

This article addresses the topic of language revitalization within a non-traditional heritage Slavic language community. It focuses on the challenges of creating an online community-based language revitalization course for Canadian Doukhobors, a religious and ethnic minority group that immigrated to Canada from the Russian Empire in 1899 and has preserved its beliefs and culture to this day. The language variety spoken by the Doukhobors, known as Doukhobor Russian (DR) or Doukhoborese, is currently on the brink of extinction. Some Doukhobors who received formal Russian language education in Canada or abroad (in Russia or elsewhere), also speak idiolects that vary along a continuum between DR and contemporary Standard Russian (StR). Russian is the language of traditional Doukhobor psalms and hymns, which are fundamental parts of their beliefs and practice (cf. Tarasoff, 1982). The use of Russian (of any form) among the Canadian Doukhobors has strongly decreased over the last two decades, which motivated the author's attempt to develop a community language revitalization course. After many years of studying DR and culture and witnessing the discontinuation of Russian varieties, the author was motivated to give something back to the community and to explore whether revitalization efforts (no matter how modest) could lead to positive outcomes.

# 2. Literature review: Canadian Doukhobors and their language

## 2.1 Canadian Doukhobors

The Canadian Doukhobors (otherwise known as Spirit Wrestlers) are a minority group who immigrated to Canada from the Russian Empire in 1899 to escape religious persecution (cf. Sulerzhitsky, 1982). The descendants of the original first-generation immigrants now form the core of the Doukhobor community, residing and practicing their beliefs primarily in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan (cf. Makarova, 2024).

The Doukhobor movement originated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Russian Empire and included people from multiple ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, such as Russians, Ukrainians, Kalmyks, Mordvins, and others (cf. Tarasoff, 1982). The group's original name, Духоборцы 'Doukhobortsy', meaning 'spirit fighters', was gradually simplified to Духоборы 'Doukhobors' and (mis)translated into English as 'Spirit Wrestlers'. The concept of the Holy Spirit (as the will to follow God's commandments) is central to the group's beliefs along with pacifism and rejection of church and priests (cf. Tarasoff, 1982). These convictions brought them into conflict with the Russian government (cf. Woodcock & Avakumovic, 1977) and later with the Canadian authorities, leading to further persecution and discrimination in Canada (cf. Tarasoff, 1982; Makarova, 2024).

In recent decades, however, the number of Russian-English bilinguals among Doukhobors has declined dramatically. Multiple factors contributed to this, including intermarriages, discrimination, and the migration of younger generations from rural communities – where most remaining Doukhobors live – to larger urban centers in search of employment (cf. Makarova, 2024).

Before addressing the issues of heritage language maintenance, we first review the specific features of the heritage variety spoken by Canadian Doukhobors.

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# 2.2 The heritage language of Doukhobors in Canada

The original variety of Russian spoken by the Doukhobors was never documented. However, based on the group's origins and the remaining dialectal features in contemporary DR, it has been suggested that DR emerged as a mixture of Central and Southern (or South-Eastern) Russian dialects with some borrowings from Ukrainian (cf. Tarasoff, 1982). As the Doukhobor community historically included people from various ethnic backgrounds, some families also spoke Kalmyk, Mordvin, and other minority languages. However, these languages fell out of use after Doukhobors' resettlement in Canada (cf. Tarasoff, 1982). In Canada, their distinct Russian variety has been retained for over 100 years and through multiple generations. It was not StR, but a unique variety ranging from the original authentic late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian dialects mix to a form more closely resembling StR. The latter forms were spoken by those Doukhobors who studied Russian in formal settings in Canada, or in Russia, or married Russian-speaking immigrants and accommodated to their speech. However, even within the group of speakers gravitating more towards StR, characteristic features of their ancestral variety are still present (cf. Makarova, 2019).

Earlier studies have identified the predominantly oral nature of DR, which features two distinct registers: ritual and everyday conversation (cf. Schaarschmidt, 2008; 2012). The ritual register is associated with the language of the psalms (the texts containing Doukhobor teachings), which were passed down orally for centuries, are still a part of Doukhobor prayer services, and are known collectively as *The Living Book of the Doukhobors*. A little over 400 psalms from this oral tradition were compiled and printed by the Russian anthropologist Bonch-Bruevich (1909) after the Doukhobors' resettlement to Canada. While writing down the psalms, Bonch-Bruevich used regular Russian orthography and modified them somewhat for better compliance with the early  $20^{th}$ -century StR norms.

As for the characteristics of the everyday conversation register, DR displays distinctive features in phonology, morphosyntax, and lexis. Specifically, previous studies have noted distinctive phonological features, such as the voiced fricative [ $\gamma$ ] which alternates with a voiceless allophone [x], as in  $\partial pyza_{GEN.SG} - \partial pyz_{Nom.SG}$  [dru $\gamma$ a – drux] versus StR [druga – drux] 'friend' (cf. Makarova, 2022c). Morphophonology includes the erosion of the neuter gender in DR, whereby most nouns of neuter gender in StR are treated as feminine in DR, e.g.,  $\mu$ awa con $\mu$ ua compared to StR  $\mu$ awe con $\mu$ ue 'our sun' (cf. Makarova, 2019). Neuter gender partial or complete loss has been described in some other Slavic languages and dialects, such as Slovene dialects (cf. Krajevskis, 1986) and Molise Croatian (cf. Breu, 2013).

DR lexis is of particular interest. While DR shares the core vocabulary with StR, it also contains multiple layers of vocabulary that are different from contemporary StR. First, DR has retained some archaic words, such as omcmaвκa for 'retirement' as opposed to contemporary StR nehcus. Second, another layer of DR vocabulary includes dialectalisms (likely derived from the original source Russian dialects), such as chocka 'egg' or κολοδa 'a round wooden container' (cf. Makarova, 2022b). Third, some Ukrainianisms have been detected in DR, e.g., δρωκe 'very' and wedko 'fast'. Fourth, while encountering new phenomena in Canada, Doukhobors named them utilizing resources of their own language through derivation and other word-forming mecha-

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nisms, such as зазвенеть 'to call over a phone' in contrast to StR позвонить. Of course, loanwords from English were also employed to reflect the new realia of life in immigration, and the technological developments at the turn of the  $20^{th}$  century. In this way, DR also acquired a few hundred anglicisms (words borrowed from English), such as  $\kappa apa$  for 'automobile' (StR  $\kappa auuha$ ),  $\kappa auha$  for 'truck' (StR  $\kappa auha$ ) or  $\kappa aby$  for 'a North American railway carriage' (cf. Makarova, 2022a).

These different paths of DR and StR development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced some false friends between DR and StR varieties, such as школьник, школьница. Whereas in DR these lexemes stand for 'school teacher' in StR they mean 'a schoolboy' and 'schoolgirl'. In contrast, StR employs the lexemes учитель and учительница to convey the meaning 'a schoolteacher'. The differences between DR and StR have caused discrimination against Doukhobors by speakers of StR (cf. Makarova, 2022b). Along with over a century of discrimination by the local English-speaking majority in Canada, this contributed to the variety's endangerment, the decline in its prestige and use, and a shift toward English monolingualism among younger Doukhobors.

# 2.3 Doukhobor attitudes towards Russian language varieties

Language shift is the process when "community members in which more than one language is spoken abandon their original language in favor of another" (Kandler & Steele, 2017, 4852). The number of older Doukhobors (over 65 years old) retaining DR with high proficiency is declining annually. While communities in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia (BC) and Saskatchewan (SK) continue to use DR in parts of prayer services, especially hymns and psalms (more actively in BC), everyday communication, has largely shifted to English, with only a few exceptions (cf. Makarova, 2022b). While StR was taught in some schools in BC, these offerings have been recently discontinued due to low enrollments. At the post-secondary level, StR language courses are only available at two major universities in BC (cf. Makarova, 2022b). Notably, DR is not taught anywhere in Canada. Until recently, many Doukhobors held positive attitudes toward the Russian language (whether StR or DR). In Makarova's (2022b) study, Doukhobor informants valued Russian (unspecified for StR or DR) for cultural and heritage reasons. They commented on its emotional connection to memories of late parents, grandparents, and ancestors. The ritual significance of DR was associated primarily with the recitation or singing of psalms (a traditional Doukhobor way of communion with God). By contrast, a few participants expressed concerns about the maintenance of Russian and suggested that switching to English could help engage younger people with the community (cf. Makarova, 2022b).

The onset of the full-fledged Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022, negatively impacted the attitudes to Russian in general (either DR or StR) and its revitalization. In his public talks, the leader of the largest Doukhobor organization, the USCC (Union of the Spiritual Communities of Christ), reiterated the group's traditional pacifistic stance: "Pacifism is at the core of what it means to be a Doukhobor... We feel the emotions of our Ukrainian brothers and sisters because we, too, have faced repression in Russia (Bilefsky, 2023)." Despite this, Doukhobors once again were "ostracized for their Russian heritage" (Lau, 2025) and even refused services by local businesses (Bilefsky, 2023). Meanwhile, the number of the Doukhobor population continues to shrink (Lau, 2025). These developments raise urgent questions not only about the role of Russian (of any

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kind) in the community but also about the future of the community itself in the modern world. At the USCC February 2025 convention, a working group was formed to propose a renewed vision for the organization. Under these circumstances, the author attempts, perhaps a desperate effort to revitalize the language within the community by developing and offering a free, noncredited Russian language course for younger Doukhobors. In view of the continuum of Russian language varieties spoken in the community, the course is designed with vertical bilingualism in mind, i.e., exposing the learners to both DR and StR.¹ The pilot course is delivered online in July 2025, and, if successful, repeated online or in person in spring 2026. The course description is provided in Section 3. Several questions have emerged in the course development, and they are the research questions of this article, as follows:

- 1. What aims and goals should the course pursue?
- 2. What pedagogical approaches are appropriate for designing the course?
- 3. What cultural elements of importance for the community should be incorporated into the course?
- 4. Which variety or varieties should the course focus on, i.e., StR or DR?

These questions will be addressed in the next section.

# 3. Pedagogical and linguistic foundations for the language revitalization course

## 3.1 Objectives of the learner-centred course

In light of the above-described challenges associated with language maintenance in the community, the course aims to initiate the language revitalization process and to create an online space for language learning and practice. The course is a pilot project designed to assess whether a language course can support the revitalization process. The specific goals of the course are:

- To develop basic reading and communication skills and elementary grammar in Russian (StR and DR, where different);
- To engage students with culturally significant Doukhobor content (such as psalms, hymns, and stories) and through this,
- To foster pride in Doukhobor cultural and linguistic heritage.

Any course planning starts with curriculum design, whereby 'curriculum' is understood as "the broadest organization of instruction" (Murray & Christison, 2014, 18). Hence, in this article 'curriculum design' is understood as a broader foundation for designing a course syllabus. It appears that for a Doukhobor community language course, a combination of learner-centered and content-based approaches would be the most effective solution, as outlined below.

These elements are grounded in a humanistic approach inspired by Paulo Freire's (2018) concept of critical pedagogy, which encourages both teachers and learners to empower the underprivileged and the oppressed. In the course under development, this means supporting learners in reclaiming pride and ownership of their cultural and linguistic heritage. Additionally, learner-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Vertical bilingualism is bilingualism in two varieties of the same language, such as a standard form and a dialect, or two dialects, or vernacular and standard, etc. (cf. Pavletić & Švenda, 2023).

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centeredness will involve incorporating learners' choices in the selection of reading and discussion materials. To facilitate this, ongoing needs analysis will be conducted both prior to and throughout the course (cf. Flowerdew, 2012).

## 3.2 Content-based approach with a focus on Doukhobor culture

The course content and materials will focus on topics relevant to the maintenance of Doukhobor culture, as recommended by previous research on integrating culture and content in language classes (e.g., Spenader et al., 2020). Earlier studies of Doukhobor culture have identified several key values: pacifism and beliefs including love, respect, and appreciation of other human beings and all living creatures, Doukhobor cuisine, and vegetarianism (cf. Makarova, 2022c; Tarasoff, 1982). Accordingly, course materials will include some simple, short texts of Doukhobor psalms such as Дом наш благодатный 'Our bountiful home' (a total of 15 words), *Мать моя, даненья* 'My mother, the Giver' (24 words), a few hymns (religious songs chosen by the learners), and everyday stories drawn from interviews collected by the author between 2010 and 2020 (cf. Makarova, 2019). Examples of these stories include:

- 1. Cοδακα Λαŭκα 'The Dog Lajka' about a vegetarian dog in a Doukhobor family;
- 2. Ποεздκα 'The Trip' a story about a girl falling off a bike;
- 3. Земляника 'Wild Strawberries' about a girl using jars as a flotation device to swim to an island in the river to pick wild strawberries;
- 4. He xyme δpyέux 'Not worse than anyone else' a story of a Doukhobor girl who goes to school and realizes that the "English" children are no better than the Doukhobor children.

Anonymous transcripts of these stories originally recorded by the author during a previous research project (cf. Makarova, 2019) will be presented in class in double transcripts (DR and StR). The phonological, morphological, and lexical differences between these two varieties will be highlighted and explained. One component of the course to be negotiated with learners will be the amount and type of mainland Russian cultural content they may be interested in exploring. The course will be covering both StR and DR with stronger emphasis on StR for two main reasons. First, learners will need a foundation in StR if they wish to continue their studies of Russian at universities, travel or study in Russia, use the Russian Internet, or watch films in Russian, etc. Second, the amount of available authentic DR content is very limited. Nevertheless, to support cross-generational communication and preserve the traditions, the course will also incorporate DR audio, materials, and vocabulary. This will raise the learners' awareness of the distinctions between DR and StR. Each lesson will include a list of words (found in the materials) that differ between DR and StR (Section 2.2).

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# 3.3 Course design features

The non-credit four-week course will be offered online free of charge. Instruction will total five hours per week: two online classes with the instructor (two hours each), and one online conversation hour for more oral practice. Teaching materials will be made available via Google Drive and live Zoom sessions. The course will target younger adults (approximately 18 years to 35 years old) who do not speak any Russian variety (true beginners). It will be limited to ten participants, as this first offering serves as a pilot project, and will be refined based on participant feedback. Student recruitment will be carried out through the USCC, and announcements at community events. Interested individuals will contact the teacher via e-mail to ensure their spot in the course and to enroll.

As mentioned above, the course will focus on developing reading and oral communication skills. Basic grammar will also be introduced, in parallel in StR and DR, where any differences are known. The conversational component will cover the ability to talk about oneself, one's occupation, cultural heritage, and to exchange everyday greetings, including traditional Doukhobor greetings used in prayer services. Learners will also develop the ability to talk about their families, cooking, health, hobbies, and interests, and engage in everyday conversations. The course will not contain summative assessments (traditional tests), as they "can lead to anxiety and demotivation" (Hobbs & Mourao, 2025, 27). Instead, formative self-assessment (cf. Wiliam, 2011) will be introduced, encouraging learners to set weekly personal goals and reflect on their progress. The self-assessment will be guided to follow key principles of formative assessment (cf. Leahy et al., 2005):

- 1. encouraging effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding;
- 2. providing feedback that supports learner progress;
- 3. motivating students to serve as instructional resources for one another;
- 4. supporting students to take ownership of their own learning.

Among widely recognized tools for motivating language learners, language pedagogy recommends recognizing the learners' efforts and celebrating their successes (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007, 171; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998, 215). The instructor will consult with the students to decide on meaningful ways to celebrate their success in the course. This may include participating in an actual Doukhobor prayer service, with a reading of a psalm or singing a hymn. For interested learners living far from Doukhobor prayer homes, an online Doukhobor prayer service in DR will be held at the end of the course, officiated by the instructor (who has experience leading Doukhobor prayer services). Alternatively, learners may prepare a video of themselves cooking a Doukhobor dish to share with their peers and friends as a way of showcasing their progress in the course. These forms of engaging with the community may assist in maintaining not only the heritage language, but also Doukhobor culture and traditions.

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# 4. Discussion with further perspectives

Research into the language use, discontinuation, and potential revitalization in the Canadian Doukhobor community raises several theoretical and methodological questions that future studies could address in more detail. First, earlier studies reveal a discrepancy in the community attitudes to their heritage language: while there is love and nostalgia for the Russian language and its Doukhobor variety, it is often also regarded as a "dialect" or an "inferior" form of Russian within and outside of the community (cf. Makarova, 2022b). In this respect, until recently, the situation of Russian language use in the Doukhobor community resembled that of a creole continuum, where multiple individually spoken varieties are situated along a scale from a basilect (low prestige local variety or DR) to an acrolect (high prestige StR) with a mesolect (forms falling in between DR and StR) in between them (cf. Bickerton, 1975; Muysken, 2006). Of course, it should be noted that the prestige of the varieties in creole continua differs for specific languages, and in some situations, a basilect may have a high prestige. English, as the national language, enjoys much higher societal prestige in Canada, and Doukhobors have long faced shaming for using Russian (no matter which variety) — from outsiders and sometimes also from within the community itself (cf. Lau, 2025). Future research could productively compare speakers' attitudes across endangered heritage languages, like DR, and speakers of Creole languages. Second, besides the regular challenges of language learning, the designed course participants will also have to face and negotiate broader sociolinguistic issues, including language prestige, ownership, personal motivation, and others (cf. Smith-Christmas et al., 2018). It will be interesting to hear some follow-up from the learners about the way their language pathways unfold. Third, successful examples of language revitalization can be found in many communities around the world, such as Hebrew or Manx, the language of the Isle of Man (cf. Lewin, 2022). These examples suggest that revitalization depends above all on the goodwill and commitment of community members. Without that, revitalization efforts are futile. The survival of Russian, whether in its DR or StR or "in-between" variety in the Doukhobor community, ultimately depends on the younger generations' choice. Given the current global political situation, the author's quest for language revitalization may, in the end, prove to be a quixotic battle with windmills. Finally, offering a free, non-credited course comes with inherent disadvantages. Without official outcomes such as credits or certificates, learner motivation may be reduced, and according to

### 5. Conclusion

This article examined the specific challenges of language revitalization within a minority community. It proposed a content-based approach to course design focused on basic reading, and conversational skills while raising awareness of the distinctions between StR and DR varieties. Importantly, the course integrates culturally relevant content specific to the community. The course aims to contribute to the (re-)construction of community in line with Nagel's (2014, 152) concept of "construction of community and collective meaning". It may also help generate new cultural expressions rooted in Doukhobor traditions and aligned with the contemporary spiritual quest of the younger generation. Furthermore, the article contributes to the discussions of the

Li et al. (2023), dropout rates on online learning platforms — such as Moodle — are often high.

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unique, often improvised strategies for revitalizing minority languages in contexts of strong endangerment, e.g., Lower Sorbian in Germany (cf. Hornsby et al., 2022) or Kashubian in Poland (cf. Wicherkiewicz & Olko, 2016). The course is the first one which offers original DR content with the purpose of supporting Doukhobor cultural heritage, and aligns with vertical bilingualism literature (cf. Sanfelici & Roch, 2021). Unfortunately, the combined pressures of overall language loss and deteriorating societal attitudes towards anything Russian exacerbated by the Russo-Ukrainian war, may lead to the total discontinuation of Russian in the Doukhobor community, and the revitalization efforts may ultimately prove to be "love's labours lost".

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