Can We Witness the (Re)making of a Pidgin in Real Time? Contact in the Russian–Chinese Border Area

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Abstract: The empirical focus of this paper is on the interethnic communication along the Russian–Chinese border. Language contact in this area has a long history; in the 18th century, it resulted in a contact variety, the so-called Kyakhta language, or Russian–Chinese pidgin, which fell into disuse after a century. The contact has resumed recently, and we are currently witnessing the emergence of new contact varieties in real time in the area. The reported research aimed to study language contact as a social practice and gain access not only to linguistic facts but also to speakers’ perceptions of them revealed in interviews and conversations. The discussion is based on field data collected between 2008 and 2010 in Zabaykalskiy Krai in Russia and in the province of Inner Mongolia in China. The study reveals different non-standard varieties emerging through interethnic interactions in the border area, and uncovers linguistic features that were typical of Russian–Chinese pidgin (and impossible in Standard Russian) being ‘reinvented’ now both in the Chinese ethnolect of Russian and in some extreme forms of foreigner talk employed by Russian speakers professionally involved in regular communication with Chinese speakers. The paper stresses the role of the professionalization of communication for pidgin development.

Keywords: Russian–Chinese pidgin; language contact; border studies; trade pidgins

1. Introduction

Pidgin languages have a somewhat ephemeral nature. Being by definition ‘native to no one’ (Rickford 1986, p. 281) and spoken by native speakers of other languages, they exist when and if they are needed. If they cannot develop further into a creole language (according to one creole genesis hypothesis, cf. (Wardhaugh 2002, p. 59), see also (Bickerton 1999)), they disappear soon after there is no more need for them, i.e., when they lose their communicative functions, or when a new way of communication emerges between communities as former pidgin speakers increase their competence in a given language, thereby switching to that. Evidently, throughout human history, contacts between groups lacking a common language occurred frequently, and quite often they resulted in certain linguistic routines: Some such routines received recognition and were labeled as pidgins while many others, we can assume, went out of use without notice and were soon forgotten. Only a few of them left traces, or were occasionally mentioned in historical or literary texts (e.g., some fragments from Leo Tolstoy’s Hadji Murat were used by Kozinskij (1974) to substantiate his theory of the existence of a pidgin in the Caucasus).

Pidgins are often disregarded by lay speakers: instead of systematic grammatical features revealed by linguists, they see in them mere occasional mistakes or ‘bad speech habits’. When a new language emerges, therefore, it is not necessarily evident for the very same people who have been creating it: unlike learning a foreign language, acquiring a pidgin (and thus contributing to its development) is rarely a conscious process. Pidgins may emerge based on a dominant, lexifier (superstrate) language, in which case, it is the output of the learner variety of the lexifier language (Winford 2003, p. 278): speakers of the substrate language may, in such cases, think they are acquiring the lexifier language and not some ‘limited version’ of it (as, for instance, was the case with Motu and Eleman...
language speakers, see (Dutton 1985, p. 22)). At the same time, native speakers of the dominant language may treat the pidgin as a ‘broken’ variant of their language; being able to speak this broken variety may not be perceived as an achievement, and its speakers are not considered, or consider themselves, multilingual.

Due to standard language bias (Milroy 2001), speakers tend to evaluate non-standard variants negatively, especially if they are just pidgins—pure pragmatic communicative tools bearing no symbolic meaning for them. Does this however mean that there is no room for development of new pidgin varieties in the modern world? Judging by the fact that it offers numerous quick and effective ways to foster interethnic communication without much ado (e.g., translation engines) the answer seems to be a positive one. Even if there would be pidgin-like varieties generated somewhere across the globe, it would be hard to witness this in real time in any case.

This paper reports a rather exceptional situation of a pidgin-like variety being (re)generated in real time in the Russian–Chinese border area. From 1727, the year of the Kyakhta Treaty between Russia and China (Foust 1969), until the 1930s, when the Soviet Union deported many Chinese and Koreans and implemented an extremely strict border policy (Chernolutskaya 2011), this area witnessed continuous, intensive language contact between Russian, Chinese, Mongolian, and various Manchu-Tungus languages. One result of this contact, namely Russian–Chinese Pidgin, known also as Kyakhta language, emerged most probably at the end of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th century (Stern 2005). Russian was its primary lexifier language. Russian–Chinese pidgin was documented and studied by linguists, even if rather superficially, as early as in the middle of the 19th century (Cherepanov 1853), and in the 20th century there were some attempts to collect systematic data (their published results can be found in (Vrubel’ 1931; Shprintsin 1968)). Due to the fact that no informal contact on the Russian–Chinese border was possible between the end of the 1930s and the end of the 1980s, and that local people (Tungus, Udege, Orochi, etc.) who used to speak Russian–Chinese Pidgin with Russian speakers became fluent in, or even shifted to Russian, the pidgin fell into disuse and disappeared in a short time. In the 1990s, however—that is, when migration of Chinese workers to Russia took place and cross-border shopping tourism and small-scale trade became possible (Fedorova 2012; Holzlehner 2014; Mikhailova 2015)—the border area turned once again into a scene of intensive contact. Social conditions of this recent contact proved appropriate for the development of new contact varieties again: First, on both sides of the border, there were few people proficient in the language of their neighbor, at least in the beginning. Second, in most cases, English could not play an important role as a lingua franca due to the level of proficiency in it on both sides of the border. Third, interactions between Russian and Chinese speakers were regular yet limited to certain situations: bargaining during sales, giving working instructions, filling out the paperwork for border-crossing and obtaining work permits, services in hotels, restaurants and beauty salons. Most Chinese labor migrants went to Russia only for short periods of time (Larin 2001; Sharmashkeeva 2007; Dyatlov 2008) and relied mainly on ethnic networks in their everyday activities, so there was no need for them to master Russian and communicate intensively with Russian native speakers. In other words, conditions favored the emergence of an early fossilized stage of L2 Russian and the formation of an ethnolect (Han 2004, pp. 28–37). Russian speakers, in turn, could rely on different means while communicating with Chinese speakers: communication was asymmetrical as only Russian and not Chinese served as a communicative tool, but Russian speakers could vary their speech in terms of its closeness to the standard language or to a foreigner talk (Fedorova 2021). Because these interactions are recent, it was possible to study the actual mechanisms and outcomes of this interethnic communication. In addition, we can also compare new data from these outcomes with those from Chinese–Russian pidgin of the past to investigate whether they tell us about the processes of their emergence. Furthermore, interviewing the people involved in language contact nowadays provides us with insights into their attitudes towards the emerging varieties and linguistic strategies.
This paper summarizes findings on this situation of potential ‘re-birth’ of a contact variety in the Russian–Chinese border area, focusing on factors contributing to the process of their emergence. Treating interethnic communication as a complex phenomenon, the paper aims at contributing to the emergence of new varieties in restricted contact situations; in particular, how actions and linguistic micro-choices of different individuals may result in the emergence of new linguistic systems. The text is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the methods of obtaining and analyzing data. Section 3 presents the research results separately: first, different types of speakers are described; then, various speech variants used in interethnic communication are analyzed and compared with the pidgin data; finally, speakers’ attitudes and perspectives are considered. Section 4 discusses the research results in terms of a possibility of further pidgin development in the future.

2. Materials and Methods

The main data for this study were gathered between 2008 and 2010 during field work in two adjacent territories of Russia and China, namely the Province of Inner Mongolia in China and Zabaykalsky Krai in Russia. In China, most of the work was conducted in Manzhouli (known as Manchzhuriya among Russian speakers); in 2010, I also visited the city of Hailar. In Zabaykalsky Krai (former Chita Oblast and Agin-Buryat Autonomous Okrug; they were merged in 2008), the main destinations visited include Chita, Aginskoe and the border town of Zabaykalsk; other places visited were towns of Novoorlovsk (2009 and 2010), Mogoytuy (2009), and Makkavevo (2009) (Figure 1). In all those places, I interviewed Russian and Chinese speakers on their life in the border area and their experience of interethnic communication. I also participated in all types of activities where both Russian and Chinese speakers were involved. I spent hours in marketplaces and shopping centers, visited factories and farms with Chinese-speaking employees, crossed the border with groups of shopping tourists and so-called kemely (i.e., people transporting goods for someone else, usually as a part of small-scale smuggling scheme; the word is derived from English word ‘camel’), and interacted with strangers (taxi drivers, salespersons, fellow travelers on trains and buses, etc.) on the matter of Chinese migration and trips to China. Observations, notes about such conversations and records of spontaneous dialogues between Russian and Chinese speakers in field diaries formed my first set of data.

Figure 1. Map of locations visited during the field work.
The second set of data were derived from tape-recorded interviews. In total, I conducted 32 interviews with 34 respondents (18 males, 16 females), of whom 6 were native Chinese speakers and 26 were native or close-to-native Russian speakers; 9 of them identified themselves as ethnic Buryat and were bilingual in Russian and Buryat (with varying levels of proficiency in these languages). All interviews were conducted in Russian. Topics discussed were border-crossing practices, Chinese labor migration to Russia, everyday reality of living in a close proximity to the border, local history, respondents’ personal experiences with interethnic communication, their linguistic skills and language attitudes.

My third set of data collected in the field consisted of over 1600 photos depicting elements of the linguistic landscape: street signs, shops and restaurants’ signboards, advertisements, menus, product information on packaging, hand-written notes, graffiti, etc. Over two thirds of those photos were taken in Manzhouli, around one quarter in the Chinese market in Zabaykalsk, and the rest in Chita and other places where linguistic landscapes are predominantly monolingual in Russian.

In addition to the field data, both during and years after my trips to the Russian–Chinese border area, I also collected information from local thematic websites and public groups on social media (mostly on Vkontakte, the most popular social network in Russia and some other post-Soviet countries; it is also used by the Chinese who interact with Russians and have sufficient knowledge of Russian). I searched forums, posts and comments for any mentions of interethnic communication issues and added relevant quotes to my collection of internet texts, which by now amounts to 543 items.

For the purposes of this study, all those data were analyzed to extract three types of information:

1. Social data—information regarding social conditions of contact between Russian and Chinese speakers.
2. Linguistic data—speech samples (in oral and written forms) documented in the process of (participant) observation; they were further analyzed to reveal linguistic patterns and to describe types of non-standard speech. Combining data from different aspects of a contact situation (interlanguage, foreigner talk) made it possible to represent a complex picture of interethnic communication.
3. Anthropological data—information regarding speakers’ language attitudes and beliefs obtained via discourse analysis of interviews, conversations in the field and internet texts.

In the following sections, quotations illustrating linguistic features are given in transcription; quotations used to describe speakers’ attitudes are given in English translation.

For comparison with the ‘old’ Russian–Chinese pidgin data, historical written sources and linguistic descriptions were used, on the basis of analysis conducted in my previous studies on the pidgin (Fedorova 2018, 2021).

3. Results

The field observations and interviews reveal that contact between Russian and Chinese speakers in the border area occur most often in the following contexts:

- Trading: both in the Chinese markets of Chita and Zabaykalsk and in the shops of Manzhouli, prices are negotiable, and bargaining and discussing the quality of goods form the bulk of the conversations.
- Providing services: service-related conversations between guests and hotel staff, clients and waiters, hairdressers, mechanics, etc.
- Official procedures: between police, border control or customs officers and people crossing the border, or between migrants and state officials.
- Co-working: work-related conversations between employers and employees, or co-workers (i.e., at a furniture factory in Aginskoe, at a small shop in Chita, or at a brick factory in Mogoytuy).
- Private conversations between spouses, friends, neighbors, co-workers of different ethnic backgrounds.
• Occasional conversations between strangers in the streets, on public transport, in shops, at border checkpoints, etc. In this case, no specific social roles could be ascribed to speakers.

In Manzhouli and Hailar, sellers and service providers were almost exclusively Chinese speakers while Russian speakers were their clients. In the Russian cities and towns, the distribution of roles was more variable as, besides Chinese tourists and labor migrants, there were also Chinese businesspersons and owners of small shops (usually employing Russian-speaking salespersons) communicating with their clients and employees.

In all those situations, both in Russia and in China, communication was maintained, almost without exception, in Russian. In other words, regardless of power relations and distribution of social roles, the default assumption was that Chinese speakers had to switch to Russian and not vice versa. However, different variants of Russian were used in this process, and speakers behaved differently depending on their linguistic repertoire and communicative skills. In what follows, I first describe the differences between speakers (separately for Chinese and Russian native speakers) and then focus on non-standard variants of Russian they use to reveal the role of **professionalization**—repeated actions in the course of work—in acquiring and developing specific linguistic strategies.

### 3.1. Types of Speakers

#### 3.1.1. Chinese Native Speakers: Formal vs. Informal Russian Learners

Chinese native speakers involved in interethnic communication in the Russian–Chinese border area do not form a homogenous linguistic group. First, ‘Chinese’ (language) here is a short-hand label used to refer to a number of related but not necessarily phonetically, lexically and grammatically similar varieties used in China, and unified by the Chinese graphic system (Norman 1988). Some of the Chinese I met in Russia and in Inner Mongolia had come from the southern parts of China and had a limited knowledge of Mandarin, while others’ native languages were closer to the standard language of the state, Putonghua. Sometimes people of different origins had to communicate via writing rather than orally to achieve better understanding. In terms of ethnic identity, besides Han Chinese, there were also Mongols and descendants of Buryats who had migrated to China in the 1920s after the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War (Boldonova and Boronoeva 2013). Some of those people were bilingual and could communicate with Buryat speakers from Russia using Buryat or Mongolian.

However, the most important distinction for the purpose of this study was between those Chinese speakers who had received some formal education in Russian and those who had to acquire Russian ‘informally’, through actual communication (see more on the concept of informal language learning in migration studies in Janta and Keller 2020). The latter could also be divided into those who had an opportunity to communicate regularly with Russian native speakers and those who had to rely on knowledge obtained from their fellow Chinese speakers. Of these two groups, the former was represented mostly by people involved in trade in Manzhouli, Zabaykalsk and Chita, who could talk to their Russian-speaking clients, and employees of small factories in Russia, who had Russian-speaking supervisors and co-workers. The latter group included predominantly migrant workers employed in agricultural and construction enterprises in Russia managed by Chinese entrepreneurs. Those workers had rather limited contacts with Russian speakers as they had Chinese speaking mediators to see to their needs.

#### 3.1.2. Russian Native Speakers: Non-Professional vs. Professional ‘Communicators’

Native speakers of Russian were also ethnically heterogeneous, and, as mentioned above, some of them were bilingual in Russian and Buryat and could, therefore, rely on Buryat while communicating with Khalkha Mongolian- or Buryat-speaking Chinese citizens. Very few people were eager to fully learn Mandarin and their capability did not extend beyond uttering several etiquette words, such as ‘hello’ or ‘thank you’. Therefore, the same way as three hundred years ago, when Russian–Chinese Pidgin started to develop
Russian was the main communicative tool today. On the other hand, monolingual Russian native speakers also differed which were in terms of speech patterns they exhibit in interethnic communication. Russian speakers who had regular professional contact with Chinese speakers tended to demonstrate very specific speech patterns that contrast the norms of Standard Russian (see Section 3.2.4). At the same time, Russian speakers whose contact with Chinese citizens were spontaneous and occasional deviated from those norms only slightly (see Section 3.2.2).

Among those who had regular contact with the Chinese speakers were employers and co-workers of Chinese labor migrants, employees of Chinese entrepreneurs, merchants involved in cross-border small-scale trade and tourist agents. They used their communicative skills in their professional contacts; however, they could naturally transfer them into other domains, for example, to spontaneous conversation with a Chinese stranger or to personal communication with Chinese speaking friends and family members. Interestingly, though, state officials—even those who dealt with Chinese citizens professionally such as border control officers or Migration Service employees—tended to refrain from any language accommodation strategies while talking to non-native speakers. Instead, they systematically spoke Standard Russian, quite often the official bureaucratic register, which is barely comprehensible even for proficient non-native speakers (see also Fedorova 2006). A similar neglect of linguistic needs of non-native speakers is revealed in recent studies on linguistic landscapes (Baranova and Fedorova 2018, 2020).

Russian speakers who were not professionally involved with Chinese speakers met them only occasionally and in a limited number of situations, e.g., at the Chinese market in Zabaykalsk or Chita, or during shopping tours in Manzhouli. Their non-professionalized foreigner talk, however, had certain local features and differed in many respects from speech patterns found in St. Petersburg where foreigners were addressed in artificially correct language variant (Fedorova 2015), and also from the same people’s speech when addressing foreigners from the West. Moreover, non-local Russian speakers—visitors from other parts of the country (including myself)—demonstrated, in their communication with Chinese speakers, different speech behavior than the local ones, staying closer to the standard language or trying to use English.

3.2. Types of Non-Standard Russian Speech
3.2.1. Chinese Ethnolect of Russian (Russian Speech of Chinese Native Speakers)

Chinese speakers who had learned Russian at school or at university in China before coming to Russia spoke the language with a certain accent and lexical and grammatical deviations from Standard Russian typically described for such L2 learners (Rogoznaya 2001). Some such deviations tended to be fossilized and used systematically, as, e.g., the verb igrat’ (‘to play’) with the intended meaning ‘to spend time’, ‘to go out’, ‘to walk around’; or mixing of phonemes/r/and/l/. On the other hand, basic grammatical and phonological properties of Standard Russian were witnessed in their speech, and most deviations in these domains, such as use incorrect case forms, cannot be generalized across the community. Self-corrections were common, which confirmed that such speakers had a clear idea of correctness and tried to achieve it.

There was no reliable statistical information on the number of Chinese migrants who have a high level of proficiency in Russian thanks to formal instruction; however, among eight Chinese citizens I interviewed only one had studied Russian at a university in China, and another one learned some Russian at school high school. There were also Chinese students who were/had been formally educated in Russian at Chita University and several Chinese entrepreneurs in Russia and in Manzhouli were claimed by my respondents to have been educated in Russian. All other Chinese speakers I met in the course of my field work had no formal Russian language education, and their Russian speech was significantly different than those who were educated in Russian. One could witness that their grammar had been shaped by the natural course of informal language learning. Their Russian speech can be described as an ethnolect of Russian, i.e., specific language variant used by members
of a particular ethnolinguistic group and characterized by systematic features differing it from the standard language (Clyne 2003).

In their thorough and systematic study on Sino-Russian idiolects Frajzyngier et al. (2021) described in detail features of Russian produced by Chinese migrants in another border region, Primorsky Krai. Their respondents also lacked formal education in Russian, and acquired it at work and through informal contacts. The features discovered in their speech correspond to those I witnessed in my field work in Zabaykalskiy Krai.

On the phonological level, the most frequent features registered for all research subjects were the following:

- **Devoicing of labial and dental stops:** s’ip’a instead of s’ib’a (’myself’/’yourself’/’themselves’, etc.).
- **Reduction of word-final clusters:** pratuk instead of produkt (’product’).
- **Using vowel epenthesis after word-final consonants:** druga instead of drug (’friend’).

The latter strategy, namely, word-final vowel epenthesis can primarily be classified as L1-imposition, because there is a limited number of words with word final consonants in Chinese (Duannu 2000). However, I believe that the Chinese writing system to represent Russian words may have also contributed to this. Chinese speakers with a higher level of proficiency in Russian helped their compatriots to learn some basic Russian words by writing them in Chinese characters (a similar method was used in the 18th century by Chinese merchants (Stern 2005), and the pronunciation of some of the words altered, forming a part of Russian–Chinese pidgin lexicon: e.g., kapitana instead of kapitan (’captain’), the word used to refer to any person in charge). Consonant clusters of Russian words could only be represented as separate syllables in Chinese characters. Consequently, the words presented in such restructured form were learnt and then further transmitted in peer-to-peer teaching. Figure 2 demonstrates an example of such a wordlist, which was created directly in front of me: my respondent, a Chinese owner of a construction company, wrote it for his employees at the construction site. It listed Russian question words kagda (’when’), gde (’where’), kuda (’where to’) and skol’ka (’how much’). On the right side the Chinese translations are placed, on the left—transcriptions of the Russian sounds. Only the third word, kuda, retained its syllable structure, others underwent serious transformations, thus, e.g., the last, also two-syllable word, skol’-ka, turned into four syllables: se-ko-li-ka (Figure 2). Interestingly, the author of this ‘glossary’ was the very same respondent with formal education in Russian. Being a fluent speaker of an almost standard variant himself, he contributed to the creation of a variant significantly differing from Standard Russian as all his employees acquired it from him.

![Figure 2. Word-list for employees. Chita. 2009.](image)

In terms of grammar, the Chinese ethnolect of Russian lacks many grammatical categories Standard Russian has, such as grammatical gender, or inflectional categories of nouns, pronouns and adjectives. The number of prepositions and other grammatical words is highly reduced (for more details see Frajzyngier et al. 2021). To provide an example,
ya magazin byla is recorded instead of the standard Russian ya v magazine byla, ‘I was in the shop’. In this sentence, the nominative case form magazin is used where in Standard Russian prepositional case form magazine and preposition v (‘in’) are expected.

In addition to its oral use, in my field data, the Chinese ethnolect of Russian was also used in a written form, it was widely represented in the linguistic landscape, especially that of Manzhouli. In the tourist area of this city, almost every shop, restaurant or hotel had its signboards and advertisements in Russian. Besides numerous lexical and grammatical deviations from Standard Russian, those signs often confused some Cyrillic letters and tended to write separate words without spaces, the latter being probably a reflection of the Chinese orthographical conventions (Oralova and Kuperman 2021). Figure 3 represents an example of this: the words nastayashchaya roza (‘true rose’) and several words in address lines are written without spaces, and the spelling of abbreviation “No” (meaning ‘number’) is incorrect: the Cyrillic letter “и” is misused for the Latin “N”.

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3.** Advertisement for a jewelry store. Manzhouli. 2009.

Similar signs could be found in Chinese markets of Zabaykalsk and Chita, meaning that even those Russian speakers who did not travel to China had some exposure to the Chinese ethnolect of Russian.

3.2.2. ‘Market Jargon’—Non-Professionalized Foreigner Talk

Russian speakers who are not involved in professional interethnic interactions (see Section 3.1.2) remained loyal to the phonological and grammar rules of their colloquial version of Standard Russian and did not simplify their speech in those aspects while communicating with Chinese speakers, even with those with very low proficiency in Russian. This being the norm, they also demonstrate certain, almost universal traits of foreigner talk (Fedorova 2015): a louder voice, use of repetitions, semantic and lexical simplifications. Besides, they made wide use of so-called ‘jargon’—a restricted number of lexical items associated with Chinese speakers and/or with cross-border activities (that was why it was sometimes referred to as ‘market jargon’ or ‘camel jargon’ by my respondents). That jargon originated from several sources.

A few words phonetically transformed by Chinese speakers became stabilized in this form and were used everywhere in the region in interethnic communication. Two of the
most frequently mentioned were druga (‘friend’, from Russian drug), used as a form of address, and kapitana (‘captain’, ‘chief’, from Russian kapitan), used to designate anyone of higher status or with power. Interestingly, this second word has the same form and expanded meaning (referring to anyone in charge) as in Russian–Chinese pidgin.

Another group of words and phrases was related to cross-border practices: pamagajka (‘help me’) is used to refer to Chinese speakers assisting Russian merchants in business affairs in China, and kemel (‘camel’), as mentioned above, referred to people transporting goods through the border for someone else. The choice of an English word could, according to some respondents, be explained by the popularity of the Camel cigarette brand. Finally, there were several Chinese words adopted and transformed by Russian speakers, such as kunya (from the Chinese noun meaning ‘girl’) or chifanit’ (from the Chinese word for ‘food’ or ‘to eat’ with a Russian verb marker). Both words were used according to the rules of Russian derivation and inflectional morphology, e.g., there were diminutive form kunechka or forms like chifanish? (‘are you eating?’). (For more jargon lexical items and examples of their use see Fedorova 2012).

Another interesting aspect of this variety is the use of forms of address. The communicative norms of Standard Russian demand addressing strangers and older/respected people in plural form (vy govorite, ‘you-pl say-2pl’, instead of ty govorish, ‘you-sg say-2sg’). However, the polite pronoun vy is never used to address Chinese speakers even if they are older and/or of a higher social position than Russian speakers (for example, Chinese merchants hiring Russians as their shop assistants). More than once during my observations in the market-place I witnessed the same customer addressing a Chinese seller by ty and a Russian seller by Vy, e.g., Davaj etu kurtku! (‘Give me this jacket’, the imperative is in singular) vs. Pakazhite, pazhalujsta, vot etu (‘Show me, please, that one’, the imperative is in the plural).

3.2.3. Imitation of Chinese Ethnolect

In their in-group communication, many Russian speakers of the border area switched from time to time to another non-standard Russian variety, which could be described as a mock Russian, i.e., the imitation of the way Chinese speakers use Russian. This variety involved phonetic transformations, as well as using ‘jargon’ words and ‘wrong’ morphological forms, which were however not necessarily compliant with actual patterns of the Chinese ethnolect of Russian. Moreover, ‘wrong’ lexical and morphological items could be used as insertions alternating with ‘normal’ forms. Phonological imitation was more consistent and marked whole segments of speech aimed as this ‘mock Chinese Russian’.

The function of this variant was non-pragmatic: it was used as language play, as a form of relaxed, funny, friendly behavior, mostly by younger Russian speakers. According to my respondents, they did it with Russian speaking friends and never switched to it in their face-to-face interaction with Chinese speakers. Unlike the ‘Mock Chinese’ described in Gessler (Forthcoming), this mocking occurred in the absence of its object and, we can assume, was aimed at maintaining group identity, both the identity of a small group of friends and of a more general group of Russian speakers opposed to Chinese.

Another form of mocking Russian Chinese for the purpose of in-group bonding was finding, sharing and laughing at various mistakes in elements of linguistic landscapes. Photos of signboards with wrong, dubious or even indecent meanings served as memes and private jokes. ‘Chinese-like’ spelling could also be used in private messages: pivet, dalqaya instead of privet, dorogaya (‘hello, dear’). Other examples could be found on internet forums discussing shopping trips to China when people described their experiences and gave advice about bargaining with Chinese speakers ‘using their language’:

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friend      money.nom   few          home-la    cheap.compar
korifana   yuan’       malo,       domoj-la,   shevre, shevre
cheap.compar
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‘Friend [slang word], (I have) little money, (?? went) home, (sell) cheaper’
In the glossa to the quoted phrase, the Russian-origin morphemes are in upright case while Chinese ones are in Italic. Notice the phonetic distortion in the last word in which the first syllable is deleted and /l/ is substituted with /r/, cf. the standard Russian form deshevle. The particle la may have double origin due to partial overlap between Chinese and Russian forms of expressing past tense (in Russian the suffix -l marks past tense and the ending -a expresses feminine gender). Similar forms, including combinations of the particle la with nouns instead of verbs can be found in the data on Russian–Chinese Pidgin (see Fedorova 2018). Constructing this phonetically, grammatically and lexically hybridized phrase, the author of the comment aims to describe both ‘their language’, i.e., Chinese ethnolect, and the way it should be imitated by Russian speakers to get better prices. Some of those features indeed could be found in the speech of Russian speakers talking to Chinese speakers, but only if the former belonged to the group of ‘professionalized communicators’ (see Section 3.1.2).

3.2.4. Professionalized Foreigner Talk (Pidgin-like Forms)

Russian speakers who maintain professional interactions with Chinese speakers demonstrated an extremely high degree of variation in their speech. When addressing Chinese speakers, they could alternate between phrases and words fully compliant with Standard Russian rules, and word structures which violated the norms of Russian morphology. Certain grammatical tendencies were evident in the data despite a high level of variation. Particular morphological forms were used more often than others and evidently tended to become systematic.

The basic form for nouns, if they were not used ‘correctly’, was, unsurprisingly, the nominative singular, e.g., tri zub instead of tri zuba (notice that Standard Russian requires genitive on the noun here, i.e., zuba); Nina (nom) skazhi instead of Nine (dat) skazhi ‘tell Nina’. Prepositions were often omitted: Chita paekhala instead of v Chitu paekhala in accusative with preposition v (‘went to Chita’).

Adjectives were rarely used in this type of interethnic communication. In the rare instances when they occurred, the masculine nominative singular form was most often employed. This is illustrated by pravil’nyj bumaga ‘lit: good paper; intended: correct document’, in which the adjective pravil’nyj is masculine, unlike the standard feminine form pravi’naya. Quite often ‘noun + noun’ compounds were used in which the first constituent functioned as an attribute: rodina yazyk ‘homeland language, native language’, unlike the adjectival form in Russian rodnoy

Personal pronouns in the data were mainly used in the form of the nominative case: tam bumaga ya est’ (lit. ‘there paper I is’ meaning ‘I have a paper (document) there’) instead of tam bumaga u minya est’ with the genitive form of the pronoun in combination with preposition u (meaning ‘near’) demanded by Standard Russian rules. Verbs in most cases were represented by imperative forms: ya den’gi zaplati (lit. ‘I money pay[Imper]’ meaning ‘I will pay money’) instead of ya den’gi zaplachu in the future tense. The use of imperatives with the intention of inflected verb forms is the most important evidence of the similarity between this new contact variety and Russian–Chinese pidgin documented in the history (cf. maya Mikita skazvyaj (lit. ‘My Mikita[Nom] tell[Imper]’) meaning ‘I will tell Mikita’ in Cherepanov 1853; for more details, see Fedorova 2021).

It should be noted also that switching to the contact variety of Russian usually occurred in situation when there were, misunderstandings. It was applied more or less consciously to avoid communication breakdowns, guaranteeing that the message was transmitted correctly. It was, therefore, treated as a pragmatic strategy, unlike the imitation of the Chinese ethnolect in mock communication.

3.2.5. Comparison between Speech Types and Russian–Chinese Pidgin

To sum up, a comparison of four non-standard varieties described above and Russian–Chinese pidgin data is presented in Table 1. The detailed analysis of grammatical, phonological and lexical features of Russian–Chinese Pidgin can be found in (Fedorova 2018;
Table 1. Comparison between speech types.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Chinese Ethnolect</th>
<th>Market Jargon</th>
<th>Imitation of Chinese Ethnolect</th>
<th>Professionalized Foreigner Talk</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Devoicing of labial and dental stops</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplification of word-final clusters</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V-epenthesis in consonant-final words</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Only with word-final consonants in some ‘jargon’ words</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Only with word-final consonants in some ‘jargon’ words</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using ‘Chinese jargon’ words</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (some of them are the same as in ‘new jargon’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using one (singular) form of address</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased lexical role of reduplication</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, in some ‘jargon’ words</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of grammatical gender</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes but not systematically</td>
<td>Yes but not systematically</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of nominal class inflection</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes but not systematically</td>
<td>Yes but not systematically</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for one verb form</td>
<td>Yes (imperative)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes but not systematically</td>
<td>Yes (imperative)</td>
<td>Yes (imperative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammaticalization of some words or parts of words (e.g., la)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes but not systematically</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3. Speakers’ Perspective

We see, therefore, that there are phonological, lexical and grammatical similarities between the Russian–Chinese pidgin and some non-standard varieties of Russian discovered in the border area. Just by looking at the Chinese–Russian pidgin data, one would only left with the choice of educational guess to discover what motivated speakers to choose or not to choose certain forms, whether or not they consciously tried to imitate their interlocutors, and how they treated them. Modern data, however, provide us with a unique opportunity to study speakers’ perspectives in a similar setting as that of Russian–Chinese pidgin: via analyzing information provided by modern-day speakers concerning language issues, as well as their behavioral patterns in different communicative situations, one can come to a conclusion about the mechanisms of the emergence of new varieties in this area, which could be extended to Chinese Pidgin as well.

Being the side that demonstrates more cooperative linguistic behavior, Chinese speakers often expressed their frustration and disappointment with Russian speakers’ lack of efforts to cooperate. The following excerpt illustrates this: “They scream, they curse… I don’t understand! Why are they so rude? It is so difficult with such people!” (Chinese saleswoman at a drugstore in Manzhouli, 2010). At the same time, ‘rudeness’ and ‘noisiness’ were unanimously described by Russian speakers as basic characteristics of Chinese speakers: “They are so loud! They never speak gently, always shout. And never any polite word, very rude” (male student interviewed in Chita in 2009). The Chinese were also assumed to make use of the Russians’ inability to understand Chinese to deceive and laugh at them: “You never
know what they talk between themselves about you, maybe they call you stupid or ugly, how can you know?” (female student, recorded in Zabaykalsk in 2008). Such negative interpretations of others’ behavior are not new: in the 18th century, when barter trade between Russian and Chinese merchants started in Kyakhta, according to popular belief, the Chinese government forbade its subjects to let foreigners learn Chinese in order to keep it a secret language, and Russian speakers used to be very suspicious about what the Chinese were discussing in their presence (Maksimov 1864, pp. 488–91).

However, apart from mutual negative feelings accompanying interethnic interactions, there were also expressions of feelings related not to ethnic prejudices and fears but to issues of language ideology. All informants who used the ‘professionalized’ form of foreigner talk (Section 3.2.4) expressed rather negative feelings towards this ‘broken language’ and were reluctant and embarrassed to admit the fact they themselves spoke that way. In many cases, informants tried to avoid speaking with Chinese in the presence of witnesses, especially researchers, who were treated as educated and ‘cultured’ persons (and that certainly made obtaining data exceedingly challenging). Any reference to this form of language was accompanied by explanations such as the following: “Well, here with them we forgot Russian ourselves. They don’t understand otherwise, so we have to break the language. It’s terrible, of course” (middle-aged woman supervising Chinese workers at the furniture factory in Aginskoe, recorded in 2008).

In other words, the usual justification for using foreigner talk was that “they do not understand otherwise”. While unavoidable, this type of speech was perceived as shameful in the eyes of Russian speakers. Using imitations of the Chinese ethnolect to mock Chinese speakers (Section 3.2.3) and to maintain contrast between ‘us’ and ‘them’ complemented that image of language conflict.

Linguistic attitudes, therefore, both towards the way Chinese speak Russian and the way they make Russians speak it, were strongly negative, probably preventing pidgin-like forms from spreading outside of close-knit professional networks.

4. Discussion

The interethnic communication practices in the Russian–Chinese border area are very complicated. There is no single means of communication, even if on the surface it looks as if all sorts of interactions are conducted using the Russian language. There is certainly an asymmetrical linguistic relation between the two groups: Chinese speakers are expected to acquire some Russian and be able to communicate in a number of typical situations, while most Russian speakers are ready to make only slight adjustments to the needs of their partners in conversation. Such compromise strategies—using certain lexical items, speaking louder (although that can be interpreted as aggressive behavior rather than cooperation), or repeating some words and phrases several times—are not enough to create a stable language variant shared by both sides.

At the same time, in professionalized communication between Russian and Chinese speakers, convergence between the Chinese ethnolect of Russian and Russian native speakers’ foreigner talk is evident. Russian speakers do use grammatical forms deviating from Standard Russian with the intention of achieving better understanding and, in so doing, create an environment where the Chinese ethnolect can thrive as there is less pressure for its speakers to achieve a higher level of proficiency in Russian. However, such ‘greenhouse conditions’, probably favorable for pidgin development, exist only in small communities and are mostly hidden from the eyes of the majority of Russian speakers. Moreover, even professional communicators themselves, responsible for creating such ‘communicative oases’, prefer to keep quiet about them and do not perceive their own ability to modify their verbal behavior and experiment with language as an achievement, as something to be proud of. On the contrary, this language variant is associated with resentment and disgrace.

We can therefore assume that professionalization in interethnic communication plays an extremely important role in this contact area. A comparison of my two case studies of mixed families is revealing in this respect. In one family the Chinese speaking husband and
the Russian speaking wife have been doing business together for more than ten years, and the wife supervised their migrant employees. Her husband, despite many years spent in Russia, spoke Chinese ethnolect of Russian, and in their business negotiations with Russian speaking partners the wife helped him translate from Standard Russian into ‘pidgin’ which served in this case as their ‘secret weapon’. At the same time, she confessed she was ashamed and frustrated by the ‘primitiveness’ of their communication and was afraid it was spoiling her ‘normal language’, turning her from an educated person into someone ‘semilingual’.

In the second family, the wife’s work had nothing to do with her Chinese husband’s business. She communicated with him in Standard Russian and even forbade him to speak Chinese with their children as she was afraid it would harm their ability to master the Russian language. At the end of our hours-long interview, I mentioned to her the fact that some Russian speakers did use ‘broken language’ to speak to the Chinese, she was extremely surprised and even appalled: Kak eto? Ne kitaitsy prisposabivatsya k russkim, a russkie nachinayut govorit po-kitajski? (‘How can it be? Do you mean It is not the Chinese who adjust to the Russians, but the Russians who start speaking Chinese?’). For her, such a non-standard variety of Russian was an equivalent of ‘switching to Chinese’. She herself expressed willingness one day to start learning Chinese through some courses but she never dreamt of trying to acquire it from her husband.

These two cases highlight two aspects of the situation: first, the primary importance of professionalization in interethnic communication; second, the serious impact language ideology may have. There is evidently a very strong monolingual bias shown typically by Russian speakers: despite differences in their actual behavior, those two women expressed similar attitudes and treated non-standard varieties as inferior and harmful. Presumably, such attitudes shared by many Russian speakers could negatively affect any further development of contact varieties in the border area.

One important factor for a potential ‘re-birth’ of the pidgin in the Russian–Chinese border area is the instability of language contact. In March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began, the border was closed for non-essential travel, shopping tourism became impossible, and most labor migrants had to leave Russia. Many established business and personal ties have been broken as a result and it remains to be seen if they can be restored. However, when and if cross-border economic activity returns to the region, it would be extremely interesting to witness a new phase in the interactions and the ways they affect local language variants.

Summing up, it is important to underline that the unpredictability of language contact results in its ambiguous perception by its speakers, making it difficult to conceptualize the situation in fixed terminological categories. When can we refer to a certain non-standard variant as a pidgin? Do we need its existence to be confirmed by the speakers? If standard language culture prevents them from recognizing it as a separate variant, does that mean that its actual use could also be affected by language ideology? We can assume that language attitudes of Russian speakers in this region now are not the same as those three hundred years ago and, therefore, outcomes of language contact could also be different. In other words, not knowing the future, no one can say for sure if the process we are witnessing now is a pidgin formation. At the same time, the complexity of the observed situation could be projected to the past: there were also no fixed terms and guaranteed results and, most likely, different people behaved differently, a few of them introducing new linguistic strategies and leading the changes, and others following or not following them, the same way we can witness now.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the German Research Foundation grant ‘Russian-Chinese Language Contacts and Border Trade: the Past and the Present’ (GZ: 436 RUS 113/960/0-1), 2008–2010.
Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, due to the reason that there were no ethical review boards and relevant procedures in Russia at the time of the study.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects interviewed and audio-recorded in the course of the study. Personal names and recognizable details are not quoted in the text.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: I would like to express my deep gratitude to my German colleagues Christian Voss and Dieter Stern with whom I collaborated on this project.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

Notes
1 According to Russian legislation, foreigners cannot work in shops and markets.
2 In Russian–Chinese pidgin, possessive pronouns were used instead: ‘maya bumaga est’ (‘I have a paper’ [a document]).

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