

***Il parlait assez bien français et plusieurs langues:*
Foreign Language Acquisition and the Diplomatic
Self-Fashioning of Prince Boris Ivanovich Kurakin***

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Using the example of Prince B. I. Kurakin (1676–1727), the Imperial Russian diplomat who served as extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador to France (1724–1727), this article seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the possible reasons for the adoption of French as the language of international communication in general and eighteenth-century diplomacy in particular. It asks when the Moscow-born Gediminid prince learned to speak French and how this non-native speaker of the language became proficient enough to impress a finicky and fastidious interlocutor like Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon (1675–1755). The author suggests that the answer to these questions lies not in Russia or France, but in Poland and Italy; and not in the halls of formal educational institutions, but in the networks of personal connections that were sustained as much by face-to-face communication as by written correspondence. This brief biographical survey of the development of Prince Kurakin’s “linguistic personality” demonstrates the mediating role of modern, vernacular languages (Russian, Polish, Italian) in the transition from Latin to French as the *lingua franca* of international diplomacy. It also emphasizes the intimate connection between foreign language acquisition and diplomatic self-fashioning, showing how linguistic knowledge could be instrumentalized for both personal and professional advancement. In doing so, it illustrates the active role that individual brokers – especially, but not exclusively, aristocratic royal servitors with broad linguistic skills and extensive international connections, like Prince Kurakin and the duc de Saint-Simon – played in creating the very notion of an early modern “European” style of diplomacy based on the cultural dominance of the French language.

Keywords: Prince B. I. Kurakin, foreign language acquisition, French language, language of international diplomacy, duc de Saint-Simon, 18th century

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Автор обращается к проблеме освоения французского языка как для определенного уровня общения в бюрократически-властных структурах, так и для продвижения по карьерной лестнице. На основе биографии князя Б. И. Куракина (1676–1727), чрезвычайного и полномочного посла в Париже (1724–1727), раскрывается вопрос о возможных причинах принятия французского языка в контексте развития дипломатии XVIII в. Исследуется то, когда и каким образом князь Куракин научился столь искусно говорить по-французски, что произвел благоприятное впечатление на своего собеседника Луи де Рувруа, герцога Сен-Симона (1675–1755). Автор предполагает, что ответ следует искать не в России или Франции, а в Польше и Италии, и не в залах официальных учебных заведений, а в сетях личных связей, которые поддерживались Куракиным через непосредственное общение и через эпистолярный обмен. Этот краткий биографический обзор развития «языковой личности» князя демонстрирует опосредующую роль ряда языков (русского, польского, и итальянского) в переходе от латыни к французскому как *lingua franca* международной дипломатии. В статье подчеркивается тесная связь между изучением иностранного языка и дипломатическим самосотворением и показывается, как знание языков могло быть использовано дипломатом раннего Нового времени для достижения личных и профессиональных целей. Автор демонстрирует, что отдельные посредники – особенно знатные служители империи, обладающие широкими языковыми познаниями и обширными международными связями – играли активную роль в создании самого понятия «европейского» стиля дипломатии, основанного на культурном доминировании французского языка.

Ключевые слова: князь Б. И. Куракин, изучение иностранных языков, французский язык, герцог Сен-Симон, язык международной дипломатии, XVIII в.

In his justly celebrated memoirs, the French aristocrat, soldier, and diplomat, Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon (1675–1755), created a series of charged portraits of many of his famous contemporaries. Among these historical figures was Imperial Russia's extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador to France, Prince Boris Ivanovich Kurakin (1676–1727), who served in that official capacity from 1724 until his death in 1727. According to Saint-Simon's thumbnail sketch,

Kourakin (*sic*) was of a branch of that ancient family of the Jagellons (*sic*), which had long worn the crowns of Poland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. He was a tall, well-made man, who felt all the grandeur of his origin; had much intelligence, knowledge of the way of managing men, and instruction. He spoke French and several languages very fairly; he had travelled much, served in war, then been employed in different courts. He was Russian to the backbone, and his extreme avarice much damaged his talents [Memoirs, vol. 3, p. 87].



P. S. van Gunst. Portrait of B. I. Kurakin.
After 1717. Engraving. Image from
open sources

Although Saint-Simon's identification of the prince's lineage was incorrect, and his equation of Russianness with the sinful desire for worldly things – tendentious, the duke's characterization of Kurakin's language skills is well worth considering, not least because the two men were personally acquainted with one another [Эскин]. "I have eaten with him and he with me, and I have talked a good deal with him, and heard him talk, with pleasure, upon many things," Saint-Simon wrote in his *Memoirs* [Memoirs, vol. 3, p. 90]. Since there is no evidence that Kurakin knew Latin – the main language of professional diplomacy in the Christian Commonwealth before the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and, in some places, like northern and eastern Europe, until well into the

next century [Osborne, Rubiés, p. 317; Holm, p. 474–475] – their conversations must have been conducted in French. However, French was not adopted as the official and diplomatic language of Imperial Russia, and the privileged sociolect of its multi-national ruling elite, until the mid-eighteenth century [Offord, Rjéoutski, Argent]. So when, exactly, did Prince Kurakin learn to speak this Romance language? And how did this non-native speaker of French become proficient enough to impress a finicky and fastidious interlocutor like Saint-Simon? Surprisingly, the answer to these questions lies not in Russia or France, but in Poland and Italy; and not in the halls of formal educational institutions, but in networks of personal connections that were sustained as much by face-to-face communication as by written correspondence.

A Gediminid Prince

Kurakin's first non-native language – besides Church Slavonic, which the 7-year-old, Moscow-born, Gediminid prince began to study the same year that he received his first official court post [АКК, кн. 1, с. 247] – was most likely Polish. This Latin-script, West Slavic language was not only the *lingua franca* of the self-consciously noble ruling elite (*szlachta*) of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but also a culturally significant marker of refinement in late seventeenth-century Russia [Николаев], especially among those Muscovite clans that traced their family's lineage back to Grand Prince Gediminas of Lithuania (c. 1275–1341), such as the Kurakins and the Golitsyns. Indirect evidence for Kurakin's knowledge of Polish comes from the idiosyncratic language of his astrologically inflected

personal chronicle, which was written in a Russian idiolect peppered with Slavonicisms, Italianisms, and Polonisms [Шмурло; Zitser, 2011]. As Kurakin made clear in the 1705 introduction to his grandiloquently titled *Vita del Principe Boris Ivanovich Koribut-Kurakin de la familia de Polonia et Litoania*, this knowledge went on to inform both the genre and the style in which he chose to write about himself.

I expect [сподеваюся < Pol. *spodziewać się*] that the person reading this self-authored account of my life will reprove me for the fact that I have written and will continue to write this way. And I expect also that no other nation [нация < Pol. *nacja*] or people will hold me in contempt [for doing so] except for our Russian people, for I believe that the other European ones are accustomed to such writings. That is why I can also [honestly say] that I have not undertaken this [writing project] on my own behalf, but rather because, basing myself on the custom of other persons, whether of high, middling, or of the lowest nobility [шляхетные < Pol. *szlachetny*], who have [ever] described their life, I, too, have followed [them] in this [practice]. As for those who would hold me in contempt, I do not condemn them, for I believe that they do so [merely] because of their ignorance of the way of the world [АКК, кн. 1, с. 243–245].

Although he did not identify the direct models for his innovative (by early eighteenth-century Russian standards) writing project, it seems likely that Kurakin was referring, at least in part, to the long tradition of autobiographical writing among the *szlachta* of the Polish Republic [Leach, p. XXVII–LXII; Tereškinas]. However, as the Italian title of Kurakin's memoir suggests, he was also appealing to other Latinate vernacular models of literary self-description. And chief among the sources for such models for both Poles and Polonophones was the Italian city-state of Venice [Kuran], another noble-led republic, which Kurakin had first visited at the end of the seventeenth century.

Tour of Duty

Unlike Saint-Simon and other members of the pan-European aristocratic elite to which Kurakin aspired, the Muscovite prince never went on a family-funded Grand Tour of continental Europe. Instead, together with a dozen or so of his peers and compatriots, the 20-year-old Kurakin was forced to take part in a previously unheard-of educational experiment: a royally mandated study abroad program meant to train officers for the projected but as-yet non-existent Imperial Russian navy [Дуров]. In 1697, this cohort of elite, older students, all of them already married with children, were sent as “volunteers” to Venice, the capital of a leading maritime power and one of Russia's chief geopolitical allies in the Holy League's wars against the Ottoman Porte. There the Russian navigators-in-training attended classes on nautical geography and naval architecture, which were taught, in Italian, by Fr. Vincenzo Coronelli (1650–1718), a Franciscan friar, cartographer, publisher, and encyclopedist who served as the “Cosmographer” of the

Most Serene Republic [Gatti]. For the benefit and convenience of his foreign students, Coronelli employed lavishly illustrated atlases and textbooks, at least one of which was explicitly “written, as it says on the title-page, ‘*Per Istruzione della Nazione Moscovita*’” [Ryan, p. 104, note 88]. Coronelli’s lectures were supplemented by a hands-on practicum on the open seas of the eastern Adriatic, under the supervision of Marko Martinović (1663–1716), a South Slavic merchant and nautical instructor from Dalmatia who served as a captain in the local fleet of ships that assisted the Venetian navy in fighting the Ottomans [Княжецкая; Мартинович].

During his stay in Venice, Kurakin also retained the services of Coronelli’s former mathematics teacher, an Italophile Dalmatian nobleman by the name of Franjo Damijanić Vrgadski, or, as he styled himself, “Count Francesco Damiani di Vergada” [Gatti, vol. 1, p. 25; HBL, vol. 3, p. 200–201]. Significantly, the newly-minted “count” – he had purchased that honorific title from the Venetian Senate in 1682 – tutored his Russian pupil not only in Euclidean geometry and the rudiments of conversational Italian, but also in contemporary Venetian and pan-European notions of nobility. This explains why the personal attestation that Kurakin received from his tutor not only described the student’s newly acquired skills and knowledge set, but also included a statement about the value of education (*la virtù delle lettere*), even for those men of splendid birth (*nascita*) who come from illustrious noble houses [АКК, кн. 4, с. 78–79].

Finally, during this same trip, Kurakin also made the acquaintance of several prominent patricians. Among them was Giovan Francesco Morosini del Giardino (1658–1739), the namesake of a former Venetian Patriarch and a former Venetian Doge, and the nephew of the dedicatee of Coronelli’s textbook “for the instruction of the Muscovite nation.” The younger Morosini was a patron of Coronelli’s *Accademia Cosmografica degli Argonauti*, a member of the governing board of the University of Padua, and a well-known owner of botanical gardens in Venice and Padua [Gatti, vol. 2, p. 858, 1093, note 34; DBI, vol. 77]. He also appears to be one of the Italian interlocutors and “political correspondents” who shaped Kurakin’s views, not only about the history and politics of the Venetian Republic (where Morosini served as Senator, from 1694) and the Papal States (where he served as an ambassador, 1701–706), but also on diplomatic protocol [АКК, кн. 1, с. 197–199; кн. 3, с. 177]. These informal conversations undoubtedly supplemented Kurakin’s course of study in the Italian language, which he “learned to speak a little... as well as to read and write” [АКК, кн. 1, с. 255]. Since at the time Italian was the main language of Russian diplomacy vis-à-vis the Sublime Porte [Altbauer, p. 12, note 53; Базарова], a knowledge of this Romance language was an important acquisition, especially for those “volunteers” who hoped for an appointment in the diplomatic service of a monarch who was formally committed to fighting the Turks on both land and sea. But there is no evidence whatsoever that during this trip to Venice, either Kurakin or his companions had made any effort to study French, despite the fact that this was an option available to foreign visitors to Italy [Mormile].

Kurakin's Books

Unfortunately for Kurakin, the knowledge and experience that he acquired during his tour of duty in Venice and Dalmatia did not have an immediate impact on his career. Unlike other Muscovite “volunteers,” who quickly went on to illustrious careers, including as Russia’s first permanent ambassadors to foreign courts [Altbauer, p. 7–8], Kurakin spent the next six years serving on the front lines as a junior officer in the Semenovsk Lifeguards Regiment. If not for Kurakin’s poor health, and his determination to align his destiny with his temperament [Zitser, 2011, p. 186], this situation would have dragged-on indefinitely. However, in 1705, with the support of his physicians, the royal guards officer wangled an extended medical leave abroad to treat his debilitating chronic illnesses. Kurakin used this temporary respite from his official military duties as an opportunity to prepare himself for an alternative career as a “minister,” i. e., a trusted royal advisor responsible for formulating domestic and/or foreign policy. And although upon his departure from Russia he adopted an Italianate incognito name and used Italian to articulate his desire to start a new life of world travel [AKK, кн. 1, с. 101], it is also precisely at this point in time that we find the first references to Kurakin’s interest in the acquisition of the French language – an interest that was unusual for the first (pre-1710) cohort of Russia’s permanent ambassadors [Altbauer, p. 9, note 35, 12, 53].

Even before his departure, in July 1705, Kurakin started compiling a notebook of useful vocabulary words in both Italian and French [AKK, кн. 1, с. 238]. By the time he started packing for his return trip to Russia, in the fall of 1708, he had collected a total of nine notebooks full of entries that he had copied, by hand, out of an unspecified “French dictionary” [Там же, с. 237]. In the intervening three years, Kurakin managed to buy enough books to fill two travel chests: a large one for himself and a smaller one for the tsar, who had commissioned him to purchase some books for the royal library collection during the prince’s mission to Rome [Zitser, 2016]. Among the numerous books that Kurakin acquired for his own private use were several French language tomes, including two French atlases and the French Academy’s four-volume *Grand dictionnaire* [AKK, кн. 1, с. 143, 237, 239]. He also bought an Italian-language translation of Oronce Finé de Brianville’s *Jeu d’armoiries des souverains et états d’Europe*, which taught the subjects of “blazonry” alongside “geography” and other “curious histories” in the form of an educational question-and-answer card game [Там же, кн. 4, с. 130]. Finally, and most importantly from the perspective of foreign language learning, was Kurakin’s acquisition of the “much-enlarged, –improved, and –perfected,” German edition of Jean Vigneron’s *Maître italien dans sa dernière perfection*, a textbook for foreign speakers, written (under an Italian pseudonym) by the one-time “*secrétaire du roi pour la langue italienne*.” The original version was first published in 1678 and became a best-seller for well over a century-and-a-half. It went through 53 editions between 1678 and 1844 and was translated into many languages [Minerva, 1991; Minerva, 2013]. The 1702 German edition of Vigneron’s

textbook, which Kurakin purchased sometime between 1705 and 1708 [AKK, кн. 4, с. 129], came from the press of Johann Philipp Andreae (1654–1722), a well-known, Frankfurt-based printer, bookseller, and publisher [Benzing]. As the title of Andreae's edition pointed out, Vigneron's textbook was essential for the "complete, thorough, and early learning of three main European languages, the Italian, German and French." Although Kurakin never appears to have used the German section of the *Sprach-Meister*, this book was an integral part of the aspiring Russian diplomat's process of learning to translate between Italian and French.

Kurakin's Correspondents

Kurakin's knowledge of the French language was shaped not only through careful book buying, but also by means of dialogue with actual French speakers and writers – none of whom, it should be pointed out, was ethnically French or authorized to act as a formal representative of the French king. For example, in June 1708, on his way back from his first, official, diplomatic mission (to Rome), Kurakin stopped over in the city of Breslau (Pol. Wrocław), in Lower Silesia, where he "entertained [himself] at Count Neidhardt's" [AKK, кн. 1, с. 167], i. e. at the lavish garden-enclosed estate of Count Johann Baptist Neidhardt the Elder (1645–1722), who lived just outside the city, in Krichau (Pol. Krzyków) [Joachimiak, p. 117–120; Lose, p. 40–41]. Kurakin had first met this Habsburg servitor – "an Imperial minister and president of the Silesian *Kammer*" [AKK, кн. 4, с. 402] – back in 1706 and had established a "correspondence" with him as early as March 1707 [Там же, кн. 1, с. 240]. Kurakin found this useful connection also to be quite meaningful and even went so far as to adopt as his own (1709), and later (1711), as his son's, the pseudonym ("*Lucas Paniow*") that Count Neidhardt had used for himself in their initial correspondence [Там же, кн. 4, с. 148–149, 382]. Significantly, although the well-educated and recently titled (as of 1705) *Reichsgraf* was "knowledgeable in" four languages (French, German, Italian, and Polish) [Там же, кн. 1, с. 167], his correspondence with Kurakin appears to have been conducted entirely in French (at least from the count's end, which is all that has been published).

During the same trip Kurakin also met Ferencz Rákóczi II (1676–1735), Prince of Transylvania and leader of the eight-year Magyar insurgency (1703–1711) against Habsburg rule [Kiss; Köpeczi; Ивонина]. In late summer 1708, travelling "incognito" in the guise of an ordinary "Muscovite nobleman," Kurakin "rode with a [military] convoy to Agria," a small, fortified town in Upper Hungary, "where Prince Rákóczi was passing his time."

I stopped in the same inn as [Emel'ian] Ukraintsev, the ambassador from our court. And I stayed [t]here for three days, and upon my arrival, I received greetings from Count Rákóczi by means of a cavalier from his court; and on the next day, his major-domo was sent with a carriage and a team of horses to call me to lunch; and having lunched with him [Rákóczi], I left by the same carriage [AKK, кн. 1, с. 280–281].

Kurakin's account of his first meeting with Rákóczi does not mention what they discussed over lunch or even the language that they spoke. If they did discuss business, it remains unclear whether Kurakin was following the orders of Ukraintsev, the tsar's official envoy [Гуськов], or, like some other informal, non-state agents, simply pursuing his own diplomatic initiative [Double Agents]. What we do know is that in 1711, just a couple of years after their lunch in Agria, the Russian prince corresponded with the Transylvanian one about the possibility of using the latter's contacts in Paris to bring the French crown around to the idea of mediating between Russia, Sweden, and the Sublime Porte. And that this secret correspondence (at least from Rákóczi's end) was also conducted entirely in French [AKK, кн. 5, с. 171–174, 178–181, 183–187, 197–205, 211–215, 217–220; see also: Там же, с. XV, 1–21].

Kurakin's first, official, public appearance in the capacity of French language expert occurred in the fall of 1709, a little over a year after his encounters with Count Neidhardt and Prince Rákóczi. In an autobiographical entry for his 34th year of birth (20 July 1709 to 20 July 1710), Kurakin offered the following description of the events surrounding the diplomatic negotiations over Treaty of Thorn, in October 1709:

His Tsarist Majesty went by boat down the Vistula River to Thorn, where we met with King Augustus [II of Saxony-Poland], and, while staying [t]here, took a trip to Marienwerder, where we saw the Prussian king [Frederick I]. And on the first day, the Prussian king asked His Majesty and everyone else [in the tsar's entourage] to have lunch together [with him]. And on the following day, I was sent on behalf of His Highness [the tsar] to greet the king and to thank him for the fine company, [a message] that I delivered in the French language [Семейная хроника, с. 631].

It is ironic that Kurakin's first French speech was delivered to a French-speaking monarch who was noted for his "Francophobia" [McDonald, p. 19] (as witnessed by Frederick I's decision to bring Brandenburg into the anti-Bourbon coalition known as the League of Augsburg). More pertinent for our purposes, however, is Kurakin's demonstrated ability to perform, at short notice, in a diplomatic situation that required "symbolic communication" [Osborne, Rubiés, p. 319]. This skillful ceremonial performance, in turn, was made possible by the cultural capital that Kurakin had accumulated during his travels, viz., his knowledge of courtly etiquette, diplomatic protocol, and the languages in which early modern diplomacy was conducted.

Clearly, in the period after the battle of Poltava, when Russian war aims shifted from mere survival to diplomatic consolidation of the victory over Sweden, the tsar came to recognize and appreciate Kurakin's foreign language abilities in general, and his knowledge of French in particular. This may explain why, in 1713, the tsar's wife commissioned none other than Kurakin to find a foreign expert who could draft a set of statutes for a new, Russian, female order of chivalry. During the process of fulfilling

this royal request, Kurakin not only identified a French-speaking expert, but also edited the resulting French document when it was being translated into Russian [Fedyukin, Zitser]. By 1717, when Tsar Peter made his one and only visit to the Kingdom of France, Kurakin had become one of his most trusted interpreters, particularly in private summit meetings with the King and the Regent, such as those described by Saint-Simon [Memoirs, vol. 3, p. 86, 94–95, 100]. The tsar was so pleased with Kurakin's services that he awarded him with the coveted Order of St. Andrew the First-Called, which had been promised to the prince four years earlier [Fedyukin, Zitser, p. 19, 21, note 61]. Undoubtedly, Kurakin's award-winning diplomatic performance, along with his knowledge of the language, helps to explain why the tsar eventually appointed Kurakin as his extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador to France.

Writing in the 'European' Style

Since the documents that Kurakin composed as ambassador to France were written by his secretaries, they cannot give us a sense of Kurakin's own knowledge of the French language (unless we make the unwarranted assumption that the French text of these diplomatic missives was taken down verbatim). Another way to gauge Kurakin's knowledge of French, and of the way he incorporated it into his own practice, is to compare the linguistic choices made in the two manuscripts that we know to have been personally authored by him: the previously-discussed *Vita*, composed between 1705 and 1710; and the chapter on the "intrigues at the court Peter the Great" [АКК, кн. 1, с. 39–78] from Kurakin's unfinished *History of the Slavic-Russian Empire*, composed between 1723 and 1727, i. e. during his stint as the tsar's official representative to the court of Versailles [Там же, с. 79–94]. Both of these texts were most likely written for a small audience of his relatives, friends, and acquaintances, in an idiolect that intentionally mixed foreign and Russian words. The fact that Kurakin's use of foreign languages was often tactical is most apparent in his *Vita*, which slipped into actual Italian any time its author wanted to describe events that were personally or politically sensitive, and that were intended solely for the eyes of his polyglot Russian readers (some of whom, it must be remembered, had also travelled to Venice at the end of the seventeenth century and knew at least the rudiments of that Romance language) [Zitser, 2011, p. 181–183; Zitser, 2016, p. 79–81].

Much like the *Vita*, the Petrine chapter of Kurakin's *History* was written in a macaronic Russian all his own. Significantly, however, the latter work was filled with numerous examples of direct lexical borrowings from French, rather than Italian [Ясинская, 2003; Ясинская, 2004; Ясинская, 2010]. Even more interestingly, both the approach to, and the subject matter of Kurakin's historical sketch echoed the "memoiristic" style adopted by seventeenth-century French aristocrats (and their early-eighteenth-century followers, like Saint-Simon), who offered their readers moralizing, first-hand accounts of recent historical events, often sprinkled with naturalistic

thumb-nail portraits of important public figures [Fumaroli; Billson; Aïssaoui]. Similarly, Kurakin's chapter on late Muscovite "court intrigues" not only contained unflattering character sketches of the tsar's top advisors [АКК, кн. 1, с. 63, 65, 66, 75, 77–78], but also articulated a pro-aristocratic and anti-absolutist political orientation [Эскин, с. 7–9, 12–13, 18–19; Bushkovitch, p. 437–439] that would have been familiar to his French interlocutors, who used the genre of historical memoir as a way to "set the record straight, to defend the individual's and the family's name in the eyes of posterity, particularly against those mercenary and mendacious hacks, usually of low birth, who were allegedly employed by the King's ministers to write 'official' histories" [Watts, p. 267].

A comparison of the *Vita* and the *History* suggests that over the course of two decades, Kurakin's preferred language shifted from Italian to French, while remaining solidly wedded to the notion of a refined, "European" style, which explicitly served as a model for his own literary activity from at least 1705. By branding as unsophisticated ignoramuses anyone who questioned his literary choices, Kurakin appealed to the vanity of his implied readers, who (he suggested) were as cosmopolitan as the (self-constructed image of the) author himself – a well-bred and worldly-wise Russian aristocrat, who chose to write in the manner and language most appropriate for demonstrating his belonging to the wider, "European," community of nations. However, whereas at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the language that signaled Kurakin's belonging to the aristocracy of the Christian Commonwealth was Polish and Italian, at the end of the second decade – it was French. This linguistic shift testified not just to Russia's growing involvement in European affairs, but also to Kurakin's own, concerted efforts to leverage all the means at his disposal, including the growing prestige value of the French language [McDonald, p. 20–22, 25], in order to transform himself into a pedigreed "trans-imperial subject" [Rothman; Zitser, 2012, p. 60] and model diplomat.

* * *

I began this article with a description of Saint-Simon's rather tepid assessment of Kurakin's foreign language skills because it allowed me to address one of the main themes of this special forum, namely, the timing and possible reasons for the adoption of French as the language of international communication in general and diplomacy in particular. My brief biographical survey of the development of Kurakin's "linguistic personality" [Ясинская, 2010, с. 182] demonstrates the mediating role that modern, vernacular languages such as Polish and Italian, could play in the transition from Latin to French as the *lingua franca* of international diplomacy. An analysis of Kurakin's linguistic practices shows not only that a familiarity with a Latin-script Slavic language (Polish) could facilitate the acquisition of a Romance one (Italian); or that learning one Romance language (Italian) could promote fluency in another (French). It also hints

at the multiplicity of diplomatic languages at the turn of the eighteenth century, and of the need to study more closely “*inter-European*” practices of cross-cultural translation [Holm, p. 470–471].

The example provided by this early modern Russian military officer-turned-ambassador also demonstrates the intimate connection between foreign language acquisition and diplomatic self-fashioning, showing how linguistic knowledge could be instrumentalized for both personal and professional advancement. This reading of the evidence challenges the standard interpretation of late Muscovite and early Imperial Russian history, which describes the hybridity associated with Kurakin’s macaronic language as the result of the workings of the abstract, impersonal process of “Westernization” or, in its negative, nativist form, “deracination”. However, as I have tried to demonstrate, Kurakin’s successful self-fashioning was anything but abstract and impersonal. Indeed, learning a foreign tongue required not only sustained effort in familiarizing himself with the vocabulary and grammar of multiple “European” languages, but also such extra-linguistic practices as international travel, book collecting, and political networking. If we treat foreign language acquisition itself as a site of cultural appropriation and knowledge transfer, then the facile dichotomy between “Russia” and “the West” falls aside to reveal the asymmetrical relations of power at the core of the process of cultural translation [Osborne, Rubiés, p. 323–324; Holm, p. 473–474; Bachmann-Medick, p. 2; cf.: Tyulenev], as well as the active role that individual brokers – especially, but not exclusively, wealthy noblemen with broad linguistic skills and extensive international connections, like the duc de Saint-Simon and Prince Kurakin – played in creating the very notion of an early modern “European” style of diplomacy based on the cultural dominance of the French language.

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