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ANALYSIS

Motivations for Embracing the Ukrainian Language in Wartime Ukraine

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Abstract

Prominent since 2014, the language shift from Russian to Ukrainian intensified in Ukraine after the full-scale invasion of 2022. Although perhaps the most obvious reason, Russian aggression is, however, not the only driver of the shift to Ukrainian. Practical reasons are also found to feature in the switchover.

The Use of Ukrainian in 2022

An embrace of the Ukrainian language has been a vivid response to the Russian war in Ukraine. Learning Ukrainian was the most prominent trend of 2022, according to the language report by Duolingo. In Ukraine itself, the period since the full-scale invasion has seen an unprecedented revival of the Ukrainian language, with a strong decline in Russian, particularly in the southeast.

A nationwide survey from December 2022 showed a massive increase in the use of Ukrainian, making language practices in different parts of Ukraine look less dissimilar than ever before. Last year's change in everyday language use is even described as a "drastic shift" from Russian to Ukrainian. In the whole of Ukraine, the use of Ukrainian increased by 8.7 percentage points from linguistic surveys in 2017 (48.7%), and the language is now reported to be the primary means of communication for 57.4% of respondents. The use of Russian decreased by 11.0 percentage points, from 25.8% of respondents reporting its use in 2017 to only 14.8% still speaking Russian in 2022. A dramatic decline in the use of Russian characterizes Ukraine's southeast, traditionally seen as more Russian-speaking. The reliance on Russian decreased from 50.4% in 2017 to 27.2% of respondents reporting Russian to be the main means of communication after the full-scale invasion. While it may be believed that the reported shifts, to a certain extent, testify to a desirable, rather than real, state of affairs, qualitative research shows that there are multiple reasons for switching to the use of Ukrainian in Ukraine.

The research reported on in this article deals with individuals in Ukraine who have voluntarily started to learn Ukrainian outside the country's school system as most of them have long been beyond the school age. The article is based on qualitative data obtained from three-year-long ethnographic research conducted over the course of 2020–2023, comprised of the following components: a 12-month participant observation of adults attending Ukrainian language classes in Kherson, a regional centre of Kherson oblast in Ukraine's south (conducted from 2020 until the beginning of 2022); 11 interviews with the initiators and teachers of Ukrainian language classes, located in Kyiv, Chernihiv, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Odesa and Lviv (collected over 2020–2023 and in progress); and 30 interviews with the participants of the language classes from Kyiv, Chernihiv, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, Kherson, Novovolynsk and Moscow (collected over 2021–2023 and in progress). The names of the participants quoted in this paper are pseudonyms, as required by the ethics of ethnographic research.

Motivations for Learning and Switching to Ukrainian

A visible shift from Russian to Ukrainian began after Euromaidan and the beginning of Russian aggression in the Crimean Peninsula and the easternmost parts of the country. These events were perceived as a turning point that stimulated many more people to learn Ukrainian, or if already bilingual, to switch to it in everyday life. Their main motivation was personal patriotism and contribution to nation-building, which emphasized the link between linguistic practices and national belonging. The narrative that "real Ukrainians speak Ukrainian" was identified as the main motivation for the language shift whereby use of the Ukrainian language has become a symbolic sign of Ukrainian national identification.

In addition to those motivated by the view of Ukrainian as a symbol of their identity, there has been another recognized group of people who speak Ukrainian because they are learning it and not for political reasons. This view of Ukrainian as a means of communication was also promoted in the first round of free Ukrainian language courses launched in 2013 as a volunteer initiative.

Free Ukrainian Language Courses (Безкоштовні курси української мови) have since become a nationwide grassroots initiative to meet a growing demand for accessible opportunities to learn Ukrainian, which significantly increased after 2014. Having spread to more than twenty-five cities and towns, the courses also provided a space where internally displaced people from Crimea and Donbas could integrate into new local communities at the time. An increasing demand for Ukrainian among Ukraine's speakers of Russian encouraged some

of the course instructors to develop online learning resources and launch a separate project—the platform Ye-Mova (Є-Мова) designed to teach the Ukrainian language online. The courses continued offline and online during the period since the full-scale invasion, and these classes were perceived by many Russian-speaking Ukrainians as a way to defy Russian invaders in the ongoing war.

The full-blown war called into being another large-scale motivational volunteer initiative—the network *United* (Єдині), launched in April 2022. Since then, the project has gathered approximately 70,000 people, having generated 307 Ukrainian-speaking clubs in twenty-five cities and towns throughout Ukraine, as well as in Poland, Lithuania, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. The project unites participants from all over Ukraine, including those residing in the currently occupied mainland territories and Crimea. Their participation is made possible via the online component of *United,* whereby language learning materials are distributed through popular social media platforms, such as Telegram. The project holds out Ukrainian primarily as an instrument of solidarity and aims at supporting those switching from Russian during wartime. The goal of the project is to involve one million Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the language transition, with the potential to target the audience of nine million people all over Ukraine.

Ukrainian as an Identity Marker

Prominent since the Euromaidan, motivations for learning Ukrainian underpinned by its view as an identity marker have not only intensified but also diversified with the outbreak of full-blown war. Qualitative ethnographic research into the motivations of the participants of both *Free Ukrainian Language Courses* and the *United* project shows that switching from Russian to Ukrainian is still primarily prompted by national identification whereby speaking Ukrainian symbolizes affiliation with the Ukrainian nation and state. Ukrainian is no longer declared to be merely *ridna mova* (native language), and there may even be a different language recognized as native instead. The idea is that native languages may vary, but if one lives in Ukraine, one should also be able to speak the Ukrainian language. Participants of ethnic origins other than Ukrainian also express this motivation as a desire to distance from the Russian identity they see as "offensive". Not necessarily Russians themselves, they do not want to be associated with those "from Moscow" and are attending the language courses to speak Ukrainian well.

The affiliation of language with the nation-state often goes along with a perception of language as a "weapon", which is the motivation called forth by the ongoing war. This perception foregrounds the identity of the speaker as a defender of Ukraine. Ukrainian is perceived as an intellectual weapon, while the absence of Ukrainian in Crimea and Donbas is considered their "disarmament" and seen as the reason that these territories were occupied back in 2014. Ethnolinguistic identification as a motivation for the language transition often also relates to the war—for many, the realization of being Ukrainian came with the start of the Russian aggression in 2014; for others, this awareness came with the beginning of the full-blown war.

In most cases, the motivations for switching to Ukrainian are mixed, as for a participant who joins online courses from Russia. "No one wants to be Russian anymore" says 55-year-old Nikita from Moscow. For him, switching languages is also a way to switch his identity from Russian to Ukrainian, which is a motivation augmented by his cultural heritage and a desire to follow Ukrainian news. "I began listening to Ukrainian channels with the start of the war […] because we had no information, no information in Russia […] and I wanted to understand better what they were saying," he says.

For some of the course participants in Ukraine, especially for those who grew up in the country, Ukrainian was the language that they used to speak in their childhood before abandoning it for Russian as spoken in large urban areas in Ukraine. "I had to switch to Russian when I moved to study in Kharkiv," says 46-year-old Liudmyla, raised in a village in the region of Zaporizhzhia, who switched back to Ukrainian in March 2022. These people are now regaining their cultural heritage as they realize that the "language of their childhood" is no longer second-rate.

Ukrainian is now increasingly associated with youth and the present and future. "Ukrainian is the language of youth and culture," says 14-year-old Katia who attended *Free Ukrainian Language Courses* in Kherson before the full-scale invasion and is now following the classes online. Before 2014, the use of Ukrainian was rarely linked with younger people but was rather projected onto the coming generations as a desirable prospect that future Ukrainians would somehow fulfil. Today, "speaking Ukrainian is cool, today it is fashionable to speak Ukrainian," says 61-year-old Olena from Chernihiv, meaning that it is the language a young, cool person would use.

While some of the course participants still retain Russian in use, they sometimes express the feeling that Russian is now not "timely". In response to the question whether the domains where Russian is used have had any shrinking, 57-year-old Kherson resident Olha answered that those were changing: "The more of us elderly people die, the more Ukrainian language is there," she said. With the perception that Russian is

now outdated, an association of the future has become attached to the Ukrainian language, which makes even older people consider mastering it. "It occurred to me that, considering my preretirement age, I could work as a copywriter when I retire. But everything is switching into the Ukrainian language these days, that's why I decided to start with, let's say, reviving my writing skills [in Ukrainian]," said a participant of Ukrainian language classes held offline in Kherson before the full-blown war.

Ukrainian as a Means of Communication

Such practical motivations for learning Ukrainian are quite frequent among the participants of the language courses. These motivations reveal that, in addition to the link to ethnolinguistic and national identity, language is also perceived as a valuable part of one's cultural capital and a useful resource. The practical need for proficiency in Ukrainian arises from the necessity to speak the language at work, which, in turn, was stipulated by the provisions of the *Law on Ensuring the Functioning of Ukrainian as the State Language* passed in 2019. Communication for work is one variety of the view of language as a means of communication, with the other view being the perception of language as a key to understanding and communicating with other cultures.

In Ukrainian language classes, as well as in interviews, the participants often speak about the necessity of speaking the language at work together with the motivation to embrace it as a symbol of their identity. "I am a teacher at an art school [teaching] painting, design, drawing. It is necessary, the [Ukrainian] language is necessary for a teacher and a patriot," says 70-year-old Anna from Kherson, explaining her reasons for learning Ukrainian. Anna is one of those participants who never learned Ukrainian during her formal education, having moved to Ukraine from Russia after she finished her studies long time ago. "At the beginning, I had one aim—to know the Ukrainian language, to be able to speak it because I have always been Russian-speaking. And now I very much need [the language] for work because my work is all about communication," says a recent migrant from Russia who came to Ukraine with her family shortly after 2014.

In the language courses, there are quite a few migrants from Russia or other former Soviet republics who say that, after the law on language came into force, they encountered a need for speaking Ukrainian. They often say that they lived in Ukraine easily for many years relying on Russian and now the time has come for them to also be able to communicate in Ukrainian. Some of these people also perceive Ukrainian as enriching their linguistic repertoires and mediating communication with other cultures; some even see Ukrainian as a bridge to a better knowledge of Russian. A Crimean-Tatar participant, who is learning both the Crimean-Tatar and Ukrainian languages, alludes to the view of Ukrainian as a key to other cultures, as adapted from the motivational framework for Crimean-Tatar: "Well, there is such a stimulus for [learning] Crimean Tatar that, if you know Crimean Tatar, you can understand other Turkic-speaking peoples. And there are so many of them. And they will also be able to understand you." At the same time, she also emphasizes the need to speak Ukrainian as Ukraine's national language: "But there is also the state language that we all should speak and know. I live in a state, there is a state language. And there is my native language which I should by no means forget." For her, as for most of the other new Ukrainian speakers, the motivations of communication and identification go hand in hand.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most obvious motivation for learning Ukrainian, the Russian war in Ukraine, is not the only immediate cause for people in Ukraine to speak the Ukrainian language. Even when the war is the leading cause, the study of Ukrainian rarely comes with a single explanation. The analysis of the ethnographic data suggests that it is more often the case for the language course participants that a combination of reasons serves as motivation. While the wartime foregrounds the link of language to patriotism, security and nation-building, other factors, such as the legislation on language use in official spaces, are also revealed as factors contributing to the wider embrace of the Ukrainian language. The full-scale invasion seems to have catalysed the language shift that has been developing in Ukraine since independence. However, while in the early years, the process of Ukrainianization was mostly top-down, since 2014, it has also become bottom-up, inspired and maintained as grassroots efforts by regular people. The sustainability of the process is dependent on the tenacity of the combination of two primary motivations—the views of Ukrainian as an identity marker and as a communication tool. These will be strengthened by the perception of Ukrainian as the language of the youth and the link to the present and future, as well as by the view that speaking Ukrainian is trendy today.

About the Author

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Ukrainian among Ukraine's speakers of Russian. Natalia has published internationally and written for the US Kennan Institute's *Focus Ukraine* blog on Ukraine's language policies and grassroots Ukrainianization.

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ANALYSIS

Surzhyk in Ukraine: Between Language Ideology and Usage

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Abstract
In Ukraine, 'Surzhyk' denotes a widely used language mixing Ukrainian and Russian, which has always been a source of debate both in the international academic sphere and among the Ukrainian public. Consequently, Surzhyk evokes a broad, and sometimes controversial, spectrum of opinions and feelings. The meaning and role of Surzhyk can be re-evaluated against the background of Ukrainian language policy in recent years and the drastic sociopolitical changes brought about by Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine. In the context of Ukraine's current language situation and the linguistic identity of the Ukrainian population, Surzhyk, especially 'Neo-Surzhyk', could accelerate society's linguistic transition to Ukrainian.

On the Mixing of Languages in Ukraine: the Surzhyk Phenomenon
In bilingual communities, mixed languages or idioms develop through constant, intensive language contact. In Ukraine, too, there is such a mixed idiom, which is very widespread (especially in the central, eastern and southern regions of the country) and is usually called 'Surzhyk'. It is a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, traditionally referred to by the neutral term 'Ukrainian-Russian Mixed Speech' in German language academic discourse. Indeed, such a neutral term is needed because this mixed speech is not only a source of debate in academic discourse but is also particularly controversial in Ukrainian society. Its folk linguistic origins reveal that Surzhyk originally stood for a mixture of wheat and rye or flour of inferior quality. This designation was meant to imply that it was impure and less valuable. Therefore, depending on one's point of view, social attitudes towards Surzhyk imply revulsion, linguistic decay, provinciality and a 'lesser evil' than a complete transition to Russian or, instead, an association with everyday life, familiarity, creativity, skilful and comical play with words, and defeat of the rhetoric that divides society (this last association is especially strong since the protests on the Maidan in 2013/14). This spectrum is linked to a host of extralinguistic factors, primarily in the social and political context but also to how people feel about language issues, language diversity and language policy in general. As a result, sociolinguistics distinguishes between different attitude types or speaker groups. These types or groups are, for example, language lovers, language admirers or language trivializers. According to research into attitudes on Surzhyk, these attitudes vary depending, among other things, on whether one generally agrees with language purists or not. Moreover, the covert prestige of Surzhyk (covert prestige refers to the highly respected but concealed image of a language among the speakers themselves, which then also becomes relevant for identification with a group) and its everyday use in private spheres cannot be dismissed, and both of these attributes evoke friendlier attitudes towards Surzhyk.

Surzhyk is an oral, noncodified mixed idiom, even though in Ukrainian literature and digital media discourse, there are isolated attempts to write Surzhyk down (e.g., for parody, satire or as an instrument of protest). An essential point in the linguistic problems surrounding Surzhyk is that the two East Slavic languages that flow into it are closely related and similar in their grammatical structures. Interferences, therefore, take place