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## Multilingualism in Ukraine: Beyond History and Identity

The issue of language, always sharply and painfully disputed in Ukraine, drew an even stronger response with the ongoing occupation of Crimea and Donbas by the Russian Federation. Being largely political, the notion of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism, grounded in identity and historical memory, cannot account for the complexity of present-day language challenges. Those challenges do, however, become much clearer when seen within the framework of findings

from modern neurophysiological and psychological studies, which suggest a more reasonable view that emphasizes the utility of dialogue.

*Keywords: language, identity, multilingualism.*

Питання мови в Україні завжди обговорювалося з болісною гостротою, а через окупацію Криму і Донбасу Російською Федерацією сьогодні викликало ще більший резонанс. Значною мірою політизоване, про-конфліктне розуміння українсько-російської двомовності, яке превалує в Україні і ґрунтується на понятті ідентичності та історичній пам'яті, не спроможне надати задовільного пояснення мовним викликам сучасності. Релевантна інтерпретація, однак, виявляється можливою у парадигмі новітніх нейрофізіологічних та психологічних студій, що представляють більш розсудливий та перспективний погляд на речі.

*Ключові слова: мова, ідентичність, двомовність.*

### 1. Too much for a language?

In the spring of 2014, President Putin invaded Crimea, and then in August eastern Ukraine, under the pretense of protecting the Russian-speaking population in these areas. The absurdity of this *casus belli* is obvious and has been explicitly labeled as such by many, since “for Russia to invade Ukraine to protect the right of Ukrainian citizens to express themselves in the Russian language makes no more sense than Germany invading Switzerland to protect the rights of its German speakers, or France invading Belgium to protect the rights of its French speakers”.<sup>1</sup> Yet the fact that Russian is spoken in Ukraine, as a result of “the total russification of the eastern parts and

Crimea”, is nonetheless seen by some Ukrainian citizens as what made possible “today’s Russian aggression and occupation of the part of the Ukrainian territory”.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as one gets over the first impression of absurdity and tries to contemplate the pretense expressed, one is inevitably struck by another incongruity: isn’t too much responsibility being devolved onto a linguistic issue alone? If it were just a matter of language, could we reasonably expect all our troubles to disappear if the Russian language simply ceased to exist in Ukraine? While even the biggest optimist would doubt that assumption, a belief in the power of language to set physical borders is widely entertained and taken seriously. Leaving aside the point that it is just a metaphor, from which one should not really expect any physical protection,

<sup>1</sup> Snyder T. “Ukraine’s easy, misunderstood Babel: What a TV talk show in Kyiv says about the everyday dynamics of a bilingual nation caught up in conflict with Russia.” // *Politico*. – 2 July, 2015. Available from: <http://www.politico.eu> [Accessed 07/28/15].

<sup>2</sup> Резолюція Міжнародного форуму на підтримку української мови «Нас об’єднає мова» // Портал мовної політики. – 2015. [Електронний ресурс]. [Resolution of the International Forum in Support of the Ukrainian Language “The Language Will Unite Us”]. – 1<sup>st</sup> July. Available from: <http://galinfo.com.ua> [Accessed 07/28/15].

I would like to examine whether the underlying concept of Ukrainian monolingualism has sufficient grounds to be pronounced an effective strategy of resistance, of achieving the desired consolidation inside the country, and of promoting a successful dialogue outside.

## 2. Actors in the “play”

The statement quoted in the title of this article is one of the basic theses of the interview given to the daily *Ukraina Moloda*<sup>1</sup> by a well-known Ukrainian sociolinguist, Professor Larysa Masenko of the Kyiv Mohyla Academy. The ever controversial point of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism finds a unilateral solution if the Ukrainian language is declared to have exclusive priority over the whole territory of Ukraine and a “language border with Russia” is set. Professor Masenko admits additionally that the problem has no simple resolution, as “people tend to be too sensitive” on issues pertaining to language and perceive as “pressure” many related initiatives.

Public opinion on language matters: helping to shape so-called folk linguistics and language attitudes, it is indeed a significant factor in defining a language situation in a country. At the same time, public views on language are often deeply biased by obscure cultural prejudices, social stereotypes, and personal inclinations, so that all language debates, of whatever kind, are always aimed at criticizing the present situation with languages. The two other actors in the Ukrainian “language drama” are politicians and professional linguists. While it has largely been a political issue in Ukraine, I argue that the language situation, as well as a relevant language policy, must initially be analyzed and developed from the standpoint of the science of language, which affords an evidence-based understanding of the problem, free of *prima facie* judgments and political speculations.

Having started in the nineteenth century with the formation of the Ukrainian literary language, the language debate in its present stage is mainly defined by such controversies as Ukrainian as the state language versus Russian as the official one, the “artificiality” of the language issue (which does not by itself mean the issue is not real), and the claim of a constant threat to the functioning of languages, even to all of them at

once<sup>2</sup>. However, the intensity and sharpness of the debate have not brought about an all-encompassing professional discussion, leaving a number of “dead spots,” among them the issue of multilingualism. Related to it, and equally neglected is the question of endangered languages (in the nomenclatural sense<sup>3</sup>) as well as the emerging theme of changes in the language situation in the occupied territories (e.g., the Crimean Tatar language situation).

In this respect, resorting to the data of public opinion polls should not set the limits to an up-to-date linguistic discussion that must also include, even be grounded in, investigations of language in connection with the human brain, mind, and thought processes, thereby incorporating the neurophysiological and psychological factors of language acquisition and usage. The results of new experimental research in the fields of neuro- and psycholinguistics, as well as the latest findings in cognitive science, establish a qualitatively new framework for analyzing the language issue in Ukraine. This framework not only allows new light to be shed on the complexity of the Ukrainian language situation, it also suggests a line of argument going beyond the issues of history and identity that have largely bound the above-mentioned controversies to date. The war has changed the socio-cultural context of the language situation while also posing new challenges for the established view of the language issue in Ukraine, especially in light of the continuing strength of the ethnic nationalism rhetoric and the resort to historical explanations of regional conflicts. History and identity figure as principal factors in limning of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism as, precisely, a conflict – intrapersonal, interpersonal, interethnic, interstate. As long as this attitude persists, there can be no dialogue.

## 3. A New (and Substantiated) Perspective on Multilingualism

A typical example of folk linguistic beliefs about multilingualism, and one prevalent in Ukraine, is that children will get confused if they try to speak more

<sup>2</sup> See e. g.: Горобець О. Лариса Масенко: Офіційна двомовність не об'єднує країну, а сприяє її розпаду // Гречка. – 18.06.2015. [Електронний ресурс]. [O. Gorobets, Larysa Masenko: Official bilingualism does not unite the country but contributes to its collapse]. – 18 June. Available from: <http://gre4ka.info> [Accessed 07/28/15]; Рябчий І. Про тих, хто може // Персонал плюс. – 24–30.08.2006. [Електронний ресурс]. [I. Riabchyi, About those who can]. – 24–30<sup>th</sup> August. Available from: <http://www.personal-plus.net> [Accessed 07/28/15]; Кудрявцева Л. Функции и статус русского языка на Украине // Русская община. – 01.07.2003. [Електронний ресурс]. [L. Kudriavtseva, Function and status of the Russian Language in Ukraine]. Available from: <http://russian.kiev.ua> [Accessed 07/28/15]

<sup>3</sup> See the landmark concept paper “Language Vitality and Endangerment” by UNESCO experts. Available from: <http://www.unesco.org> [Accessed 07/30/15].

<sup>1</sup> Орел М. Нам потрібен мовний кордон із Росією: Сучасна мовна політика в Україні очима соціолінгвіста // Україна молода. – 25.12.2014. [Електронний ресурс]. [M. Orel. We need a language border with Russia: Current language policy in Ukraine through the eyes of a sociolinguist]. – 25 December. Available from: <http://www.umoloda.kiev.ua> [Accessed 07/28/15].

than one language. Many parents are afraid that a child will not be able to sort out the input from multiple languages. In reality, children can easily become bilingual and multilingual (that is, develop native proficiency in two or more languages) if they are exposed to more than one language<sup>1</sup>. Axiomatic to modern neurobiological studies of language<sup>2</sup> is the proposition that a biological “language program” inheres in the brain and is activated in a verbal environment during a certain age span (from birth up to age five for phonetics, and up to age twelve for grammar)<sup>3</sup>. During this time, corresponding to the sensitive or critical period, the unconscious acquisition of language occurs through the operation of procedural memory. A language learned after age twelve is acquired consciously, by means of declarative memory, and cannot be mastered as well as the one absorbed in the sensitive period, since the formation of basic neural networks is nearing completion at this age. Natural bilingualism arises when two languages “take” during the sensitive period: one, of the first degree of nativeness, acquired in the family and outside, and the other, of the second degree, acquired outside the family. A third language can be added in the same way, resulting in multilingualism. EEG imaging of the brain shows that persons who are naturally bilingual and multilingual demonstrate overlapping electric signals when performing in their languages, which means that all those languages are used as native by them. Multilingual individuals who acquire a second or third language after the age of twelve manifest distancing of electric signals when using the native language and the other languages learned as foreign. This means that, to learn a language after age twelve, the human brain does not use its “built-in”, biological program but needs to create new, artificial “software”, which always remains under the influence of the natural one, as evidenced by the presence of a foreign accent in non-native speakers.

In view of the findings outlined above, the notion of a mother tongue cannot be associated with one’s

ethnic background or nationality as *biologically* it is the language with the first degree of nativeness. This “first” language is a neurophysiological and biological constant, and any attempt to deprive a person of its use is perceived as a personal offense, its reasons going back to the unconscious. To put it in the terms of Sigmund Freud’s conception of the mind’s structure, one’s mother tongue resides in the id, along with one’s biological needs. In the same vein, it is possible to speak of two or even more native languages if those were acquired within the defined age span and are still maintained.

In opposition to the biological and psychological understanding of language, is the folk linguistic notion of the mother tongue, widespread among Ukrainian people, which understands one’s native language as the language that determines how one thinks<sup>4</sup>. To cut a long story short, no empirical evidence has been found to confirm the hypothesis of linguistic determinism as reflected in this folk belief. The ideas that a language’s grammar can determine and constrain how people think, and that language equals thought, were advocated as long ago as the eighteenth century by such German romanticists as Johann Herder and Johann Haman as a reaction against rationalism in the philosophy of the time. Linguistic determinism has never been seriously considered by professional linguists, while the respective intuition has been explored only in works of fiction, such as George Orwell’s dystopian fantasy *1984*<sup>5</sup>, and in the ideological program for linguistics in the USSR written by Stalin<sup>6</sup>.

Proceeding from the deterministic view is another misconception, namely, that bilingualism amounts to so-called “duplicity”<sup>7</sup> or even “language schizo-

<sup>1</sup> See e. g.: Cruz-Ferreira M. Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a Trilingual Environment. – Cleveland: Multilingual Matters, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Lenneberg E. Biological Foundations of Language. New York: Wiley. Paradis, M. (2004). A Neurolinguistic Theory of Bilingualism. – Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1967; Granena G. & Long M. (eds.). Sensitive periods, language aptitude, and ultimate L2 attainment. – Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2013; Robson, A. L. Critical/Sensitive periods / Salkind Neil J. (ed.). Child development. – N. Y.: Macmillan, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Жаботинська С. А. Мультилінгвальність в Україні: наукові засади. – 04.08.2014. [Електронний ресурс]. [S. A. Zhabotynska, Multilingualism in Ukraine: Scientific bases]. Available from: <http://www.fulbright.org.ua> [Accessed 07/30/15].

<sup>4</sup> When asked “What in your opinion is a mother tongue?,” more than a third (34 %) of interviewees (the largest percentage of those surveyed) answered that «it is the language I think in, and can fluently speak”. (see Кудрявцева Л. А. (2012). Grimасы языковой политики: о языковой самоидентификации граждан Украины и государственной языковой политике // Клайпедская ассоциация российских граждан. – 14.06.2012. [Електронний ресурс]. [L. A. Kudryavtseva, The grimaces of language policy: The linguistic identity of the citizens of Ukraine and the state language policy]. Available from: <http://www.klaipeda1945.org> [Accessed 07/30/15]).

<sup>5</sup> Orwell G. The Principles of Newspeak / Orwell G. 1984. – London: Penguin Books, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Сталин И. Марксизм и вопросы языкознания. [I. Stalin, Marxism and Linguistic Problems]. М.: Госполитиздат, 1953. – С. 39.

<sup>7</sup> See Кудрявцева Л. Функции и статус русского языка на Украине. // Русская община. – 01.07.2003. [Електронний ресурс]. [L. Kudryavtseva, Functions and Status of the Russian Language in Ukraine]. Available from: <http://russian.kiev.ua> [Accessed 07/28/15].

phrenia”<sup>1</sup>, the latter term obviously intended to provoke a phantasmagoric association with a state of mental disorder. This pseudoscientific opinion presupposes an understanding of a bilingual individual as having a split personality or split identity. Instead, socio- and psycholinguistic experimental studies of bilingual identity, primarily investigating the concept of ethnolinguistic identity<sup>2</sup>, operate with the concept of multiple identities, which bilingual persons manipulate as a function of setting, interlocutor, and topic<sup>3</sup>. As a rule, naturally bilingual individuals recognize their bicultural identity, developing so-called dual worldview, which by itself allows them to conceive of the world in a more unbiased way. Pursuant to such a type of rationality, defined by having access to several linguistic and cultural perspectives, multilingual persons often demonstrate a more tolerant attitude toward other cultures and have a more critical view of the things. The latest psychological experiments with children exposed to multiple languages<sup>4</sup> show that kids from multilingual environments are better at interpreting a speaker’s meaning than those who are exposed only to their native tongue. The most novel finding is that the children do not have to be bilingual themselves; it is the exposure to more than one language that is key to building effective social communication skills. So, in addition to learning another language, children in bilingual environments might unintentionally be getting intensive training in perspective taking, which could make them better communicators in any language.

#### 4. The Power of Language: what can language really do?

While rejecting linguistic determinism, it is timely, as well as appropriate for the Ukrainian language

<sup>1</sup> Лекція Юрія Шевчука на тему «Політика мовної шизофренії в Україні. Джерела, форми, наслідки», прочитана у Книгарні Є в Києві 3 червня 2015 року. [Електронний ресурс]. [Є Knygarnia, Yuri Shevchuk Lecture on the theme of “Policy of language schizophrenia in Ukraine: Sources, types, consequences”]. Available from: <http://book-ye.com.ua> [Accessed 07/31/15].

<sup>2</sup> Walters J., Armon-Lotem Sh., Altman C., Topaj N., Gagarina N. Language Proficiency and Social Identity in Russian-Hebrew and Russian-German Preschool Children / Silbereisen R. K., Titzmann P. F., Shavit Yo (eds). The Challenges of Diaspora Migration. Interdisciplinary perspectives on Israel and Germany. – Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Fishman J. Who speaks what language to whom and when? // La linguistique. – 1965. – 2. – P. 67–88. Fishman J. Domains and the relationship between micro- and macrosociolinguistics / Gumperz J. J. & Hymes. D. (eds.). Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication. – Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Fan S. P., Liberman Z., Keysar B., Kinzler K. D. The Exposure Advantage: Early exposure to a multilingual environment promotes effective communication // Psychological Science. – 2015. Available from: <http://www.sciencedaily.com> [Accessed 08/03/15] doi: 10.1177/0956797615574699.

debate, to consider the question of the influence of language on thought. In modern linguistics, this idea is embodied in the principle of linguistic relativity, which holds that “all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated”<sup>5</sup>. Experimental studies in the outlined framework reveal differences among various languages in domains that are common to all linguistic communities. These domains include space, time, motion, cause, color, and other basic categories we all operate with. The most successful effort at uncovering radical disparities between languages has been undertaken in explorations of how spatial relations are coded<sup>6</sup>. While speakers of modern European languages tend to favor the use of body coordinates to describe arrangements of objects (e. g. *the man is to the left of the tree*), speakers of some other languages, such as Guugu Yiimithirr and Kuuk Thaayorre (both Australian Aboriginal languages), abide exclusively by systems anchored in the terms of the cardinal directions (e. g. *the man is to the east of the tree*). Owing to the specific spatial vocabulary, which makes these people constantly aware of their location with respect to the cardinal points, in various experiments Guugu Yiimithirr speakers demonstrated an extraordinary ability to identify the position of objects situated out of their range of vision at the distances of 2 to 350 km. They also turned out to be extremely competent at navigational calculus and able to retain all their memories, and even to see their dreams, by keeping in mind their location in these absolute coordinates<sup>7</sup>.

As a rule, such fundamental differences are not typical of closely related languages. Still, certain differences can be uncovered by examining prototypes – mental images of concepts identified in associative experiments or etymological studies. For instance, the Ukrainian word for “language,” *mova*, appears to be a more frequent reaction to the word *people* in further associations with *united* and *unity*, than the Russian *jazyk*<sup>8</sup>. Etymological studies of *mova* demonstrate that, as it stems from *\*mьlva* “sound of

<sup>5</sup> Whorf B. L. (1956). Science and Linguistics / Carroll J. B. (ed.). Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf. – Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956.

<sup>6</sup> Levinson S. Space in Language and Cognition. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Haviland J. B. Guugu Yiimithirr Cardinal Directions // Ethos. – 1998. – N 26 (1). – P. 25–47.

<sup>8</sup> Попович Л. Стереотип мови в українській мовній картині світу. [L. Popovych, Stereotype of Language in the Ukrainian Linguistic Picture of the World] // Українознавство. – 2004. – № 1–2. – С. 321.

voices”<sup>1</sup>, the Ukrainian concept of language implies a multiagent activity, evoking the image of several subjects participating in a dialogue, which forms the basis for the stereotyping of the concept of *mova* as a means of consolidation.

## 5. Conclusion

In sum, the perspective on multilingualism outlined in this article provides a functional framework for an effective discussion of the language issue in Ukraine, and also suggests reasonable strategies for developing a successful dialogue with other countries. Modern findings on the neurobiological and psychological nature of language highlight the crucial question of Ukrainian becoming the language of the first degree of nativeness over the entire territory of Ukraine. The same lines of evidence underscore the fact that this can only be seen as a long-term program, targeting children primarily. The priority of Ukrainian, however, must be considered within the broader

paradigm of multilingualism, with Crimean Tatar, Gagaúz Turkic, Romani, English or Russian as possible second tongues. Multilingualism turns out to be a positive phenomenon both neuropsychologically and sociopolitically. To start a dialogue inside and outside Ukraine on the premise advanced here, it will be necessary to overcome the notorious linkage of ignorance and blame while recovering from identity- and history-based modes of thinking. Maidan itself attests to an obvious thing: no matter how powerful language is, it does not automatically introduce ethnic conflict, historical memory, or political loyalty.

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<sup>1</sup> Етимологічний словник української мови в 7-ми т. – Т. 3. [Etymological Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language in Seven Volumes. – Vol. 3]. – К.: Наукова думка, 1989. – С. 492.