

## Choice of a Second/Foreign Language as a Socio-Political Issue

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*It is increasingly acknowledged that national policies on second/foreign language education are developing in a certain socio-political context. Reasons for the choice of languages to be taught in primary, secondary and tertiary schools are not purely linguistic, but also socially, politically and ideologically biased. Some languages may be resented because of the previous negative experience of political domination of the language-native country. Other languages may be promoted instead, as a counterbalance to the past history. This article deals with the historical and contemporary second/foreign language teaching landscape in Ukraine, where most people are bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian, and the language situation is strongly determined by socio-political factors.*

**Keywords:** Native language, second language, foreign language, bilingualism, Ukraine

### Introduction

“All my life I was Russian-speaking, but in the early 2000s I switched to the Ukrainian language. When I entered the institute, I deliberately chose topics about the Cossacks, about Ukrainian cultural figures, and the glaze descended from my eyes, and I began to wonder why the Soviet and Russian figures were always in the first place, and my countrymen were completely forgotten and underestimated. Then, my child was born, and I decided that I want her to speak Ukrainian. That's how I started to learn the language with her” (Iryna Krasina, Mykolayiv).

“All my life I was Russian-speaking and I did not know Ukrainian at all, only Ukrainian songs. But in 2008 Russia attacked a small Georgia. My hair just stood on end on what was happening. And then I accidentally saw a documentary about how everything really was there, and realized that we would follow. [...] That is, since 2008 I started to speak Ukrainian” (Tetyana Semenova, the village of Sergievka, Odessa region).

“I was born in a Russian-speaking family. When Putin started to say ‘they do not speak Russian here’, I thought that he was mistaken, because in Russian it was possible to speak just freely, but the Ukrainian language needed defense. Subsequently, I realized that we should position ourselves more like Ukrainians, because the Soviet Union took our roots away from us”. [...]

Gradually, I began to use Ukrainian in everyday life” (Volodymyr Sergienko, Kramatorsk, Donetsk region).

All these quotations belong to the people who, until very recently, were talking exclusively Russian. But at some point, each of them understood: “I want to switch to the Ukrainian language”. Someone was agitated by crucial events inside and outside Ukraine, someone - by the linguistic situation in the country, and someone just realized that he was a Ukrainian. They told about it to Radio Liberty (March 28, 2018).

In bilingual or multilingual countries like Ukraine, people are constantly balancing between the first (or their heritage language - in case of ethnic minorities) and the second language, facing the question of which language to use in what communicative situation. Factors that influence the choice are various: state language policy, language of instruction in educational institutions, family tradition, personal feeling of identity, surrounding community of practiced language, corporative language norms, business contact needs, etc. Situations are not rare that participants of the same interaction can talk to each other in different languages.

Moreover, straightforward definitions of the concepts “first language”, “second language”, “foreign language” in the countries where more than one language is used become rather problematic. As Bloomfield put it, “the first language a human being learns to speak is his *native language*”, adding that the child acquires this language from people around (Bloomfield, 1984, p. 43). Today, in a bilingual or multilingual country, the first language the child learns to speak is not limited so much to the language of his/her inbred group as it happened to be less than a hundred years ago. Contemporary linguistic environment of the child is strongly affected by the sounds poring on him/her from different technical equipment, like TV, radio, digital devices, etc. As the child grows up, another strong determinant is added - language of pre-school/school instruction. Both the educational institutions and broadcasting technologies are social products that mediate certain social message of their owners. In terms of language, they may provide a second linguistic environment that may be different from the first language spoken by the child’s inbred group. That is, the language used as the official language of education and state/business communication might be different from the native language of the child.

When the language of education and social media is regulated by the state, the choice of a second language in use becomes the matter of the state’s social policy. It may be determined by strong opposition of the state to alien political and cultural influences (e.g. quite recent restrictions in the use of English in France). Or some languages may be resented because of the previous negative experience of political domination of the language-native country (e.g. attitude towards Russian in most post-Soviet states).

Very likewise, when the study of some foreign language/ languages is officially promoted by the state, it reflects the vectors of the state’s interests in international relations. With increasing economical, political and cultural interaction between both neighboring and faraway countries, the necessity to enhance economic and

political competitiveness of the state, to promote national interests, to foster mutual understanding propels the countries towards more responsible and fruitful border-crossing communication. Thus, foreign language education policies and practices are carried out in favor of the languages with the largest “global capital” or the languages of the target countries with most promising markets, or geopolitically preferable partners.

There is also a personal perspective that should be accounted for. Very often the co-existence of the first and second languages in individual communicative practice is not peaceful at all, and a person has to decide in favor of one of them as self-identifying. This is connected with the fact that each of the languages in use has its very special socio-cultural context, and together with domination of one of them in everyday life, certain socio-cultural values acquire prior importance in the mind of the language-use.

The above considerations support the arguments of those second/foreign language teaching scholars who suggest that language education is a political action, whenever it is “tied up with the most crucial educational, cultural and political issues of our time” (Pennycook, 1999), invites the learners to see themselves as agents of social transformation (Freire, 1970), emphasises cultural politics and citizenship education (Guilhereme, 2002), becomes a form of capital in globalised cultural and economic exchange (Luke, 2004), and “recognises its political and social responsibilities” (Byram, 2008). From a socio-political perspective, Ukraine poses a rather complicated case of history-deep roots of contemporary native/second/foreign language situation.

### **Historical Background of the First/Second Language Policy in Ukraine**

It has been historically established that the state and native language in this country for many people are not identical concepts, and ignorance of the meaning of these concepts leads to misunderstandings and speculation. Almost 100 years ago, Tesnière, while estimating the approximate number of largest speech communities in the world, ranked Russian as the third largest. It is noteworthy that he divided the figure of nearly 120 million native speakers of the language between Great Russian (80 million), Little Russian (Ukrainian, 34 million) and White Russian (Belarusian, 6 ½ million), considering them as “mutually intelligible varieties, about as different as British and American English” (as cited in Bloomfield, 1984). This widespread misconception about the relations between the Ukrainian and Russian languages actually reflects the dominant position of the Russian language in political, social and cultural dimensions in the former Soviet Union as an inheritance of the language policy of tsarist Russia and throws light on a paradoxical discourse of Ukrainian and Russian as the first and second languages in Ukraine.

Discrimination of the Ukrainian language as the first language of a huge group of ethnic Ukrainians who lived on the Ukrainian lands joined to the Russian Empire in the middle of the 17th century began already in the next century. For example, yet in 1720, the Russian tsar Peter I issued a decree prohibiting book printing in Ukrainian and extracting Ukrainian texts from church books (Ohienko,

1942). The next decades and centuries of imperial history of the Ukrainian lands offers immense evidence of sustaining attempts of the ruling power to ban the first language of a huge ethno-cultural group and replace it with Russian, close all Ukrainian-language schools, prohibit printing and import from abroad of any Ukrainian literature, etc.

As a result of the artificial inhibition of the possibilities to use the native language in vital spheres, a spike in self-identification of Ukrainians through the language took place during the liberation struggles of 1917-1920. The newly formed Ukrainian People's Republic directed all its efforts to return the status of the state language to Ukrainian, to restore its public use, open Ukrainian-language schools and universities, print literature and periodicals in Ukrainian.

The language processes that took place in the USSR after the complete establishment of the Soviet power on the lands of the former Russian Empire developed under the slogans of Marx's idea of the future world-wide unification of nations and, consequently, the fusion of national languages. Concentrating in its hands all the power and subjecting total control to all spheres of life, the Bolshevik Party carried out linguistic and cultural assimilation of non-Russian ethnic minorities. The Russian nation began to be positioned as the elder and wiser brother of all the large and small national groups of the Soviet Union. A possession of all media enabled the state power to promote Russian as the main language of interethnic communication in the multinational USSR under the slogans of the "single family of peoples", "fraternal friendship", and "proletarian internationalism".

At the end of the 1950s, the idea was popularized in linguistic literature and journalism that the use of Russian in the USSR was no longer limited to the means of interethnic communication - it was proclaimed the *second native* language of the non-Russian nations of the USSR. In 1961, it was canonized by Nikita Khrushchev in his report on the new Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at the XXII Party Congress. As to the development of national languages, he noted that it should lead to the rapprochement of nations. Furthermore, he stressed that the voluntary study of the Russian language by non-Russian peoples would have a positive effect on the development of interethnic cooperation. In other words, he connected the program proposed by the congress on the construction of communism with the strengthening of the role of Russian as a second native language in the USSR (Doklad, 1961). According to Masenko (2005), the tenet about Russian as a second native language, despite the obvious impossibility of its scientific substantiation, became mandatory in the official linguistics of the Soviet Republics. In fact, this tenet marked the beginning of official bilingualism in the Soviet Union.

Further program documents of the state authorities of the USSR continued to wash away the concept of "native language" in the minds of non-Russian minorities. The process of "Russification" of various ethnic groups only intensified. In the early 1970s, the political leadership of the USSR announced the completion of "erasing national differences" and creation of a new historical community - "the Soviet people". The priority of the Russian language prevailed in all spheres - state administration, education, mass media, literature, theater, etc.

The Soviet regime consistently formed complex of inferiority in attitudes of non-Russians to their mother tongue and culture.

As an outcome of social pressure that has occurred together with official domination of Russian, native languages became a subject of ridicule as “peasant languages”. In his comparison of the social status of Russian and Ukrainian at that time, Subtelny (1988) draw the following picture: “The world of big cities – the political, economic, scientific elite, the world of modernity in general - is basically Russian. The world of village - collective farmers, national customs - is mostly Ukrainian” (Subtelny, 1988, p. 642). No wonder that reduction of social attractiveness of Ukrainian undermined its position in education. In Ukraine, the number of native-language schools has started to decrease in cities and towns. In the largest cities there remained very few such schools - the Ukrainian language of instruction became the prerogative of rural schools.

On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the peculiarity of the linguistic situation in Ukraine was that Russian, although the second language from the ethnic perspective, dominated in state power and everyday use, as a sign of socio-political loyalty to the Soviet regime.

### **Language Pendulum in the Last Decades**

According to the last Soviet 1989 census, 87.8% of Ukrainians confirmed Ukrainian to be their native language. In fact, it might be rather an emotional declaration than a conscious choice, since in practice they were using Russian in most linguistic situations. The restoration of Ukraine’s independence in 1991 did not lead to a significant reduction in the use of the Russian language. Instead, the situation turned into a language pendulum swinging back and forth in the Ukrainian-Russian bilingual environment.

The trouble was that people who came to power in Ukraine continued to publicly promote official bilingualism, which, in reality, turned out to be anti-Ukrainian policy because it further hampered the consolidation of the society on the idea of supporting the Ukrainian language as a state-building factor, protecting the nation as a community and serving as its immune system from empire-subordinate syndrome.

The Constitution of Ukraine (1996) proclaimed Ukrainian the only state language and assigned to the state the duty to ensure the comprehensive development and functioning of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of public life throughout the country. However, a series of further laws and draft documents formulating the principles of state language policy and advocating a broader functioning of the Ukrainian language as a state language have not managed yet to become a turning point in overcoming the centuries-old deformation of the language environment in the country. Moreover, the language issue of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism is usually pushed forward from its position of relative equilibrium in times when political struggle escalates ahead of presidential or parliamentary elections. It is used then by various political groups in their own interests to gain the attachment of pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian electorate.

Progressive disbalance regarding the reduction of the Ukrainian language usage is well demonstrated by the ratio of the Ukrainian-speaking people and ethnic

Ukrainians. According to the last All-Ukrainian Population Census of 2001, Ukrainians constituted 77.8% of the population of Ukraine, while the Ukrainian language was recognized as the native language only by 67.5%. The data was proved by the 2005 all-Ukrainian poll conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine: Ukrainian was considered the mother tongue by 64.3% of the respondents, Russian by 34.4%, and another language by 1.5% (Ukrainska). Less than in a decade, the number of people confirming Ukrainian as their native language has still decreased (56.2% of 2,760 participants of the public opinion poll conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in February-March 2013), while the amount of Russian-native respondents has increased to 39.6% (Dumky, 2013).

At the same time, attempts are regularly made to legitimize Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism as a state language policy. The activity of these attempts depends entirely on the orientation of the country's leadership towards Russia or the West. During the periods of the pro-Russian leadership, there is all possible assistance in spreading Russian. Proposals are gaining strength to make the Russian language a second state language or a second regional language in certain territories inhabited by a significant number of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. When pro-Western leaders come to power, the tendency of Ukrainianization of the social, cultural, and educational spheres of life is increasing.

Similarly, the views of scholars are polarized. Some scholars (Azarova, 2015; Bondar, 2003; Masenko, 2005) argue that multilingualism or bilingualism at the state level is a destructive process for the country, since mass bilingualism, deformation of the linguistic situation, communication conflicts can lead to a loss of social consolidation and dangerous processes of assimilation, both linguistic and national-cultural. Ivanenko and Bereshchuk (2012) admit that legitimized bilingualism in the conditions of the domination of the Russian language during the Soviet era and the policy of language nihilism during the years of independence led to a global national degradation of the Ukrainian people. Other researchers (Pashkov, 2010) insist that the process of development of natural bilingualism in Ukraine is significantly complicated and deformed by ideological and political factors, and the artificial limitation of the functioning of the Russian language inhibits the development of the country, impoverishes communication between people, and undermines the role of the word.

In the course of discussions about the status of Ukrainian and Russian languages, the terms “titular nation” and “indigenous nation” became activated, since the term “native language” in the sense of “the first language that a person possessed in an early childhood” was doubted as inaccurate and incorrect to describe the linguistic situation in Ukraine (Vysnovok, 2012).

It is important to point out that the events of the last 4 years associated with the Russian annexation of the Crimea, Ukraine's struggle against Russian aggression and separatist forces in the East of the country, which brought significant human and economic losses, have intensified Ukrainian self-identification in terms of language. A sociological survey carried out by the Razumkov Center (Konsolidatsia, 2016) proves that these processes have affected the linguistic situation in Ukraine as well. In particular, the number of citizens who

consider Ukrainian as their mother tongue has increased (69% in 2016 versus 61% in 2011); regarding Russian as a native language, this figure has decreased (27% vs. 36%). At the same time, the home use of languages has changed less noteworthy: the use of Ukrainian has slightly increased (55% vs. 52% in 2011), and Russian has decreased (41% vs. 45%). Consequently, more visible changes have taken place in the language identity of citizens than in language practices, which proved to be more stable.

Although the use of Russian at home and in the streets is still high, there is a tendency towards a decrease in the number of schoolchildren willing to study Russian. However, even under such a condition, it stays omnipresent in everyday life because of powerful mass media support (from Russia including), pop culture, fiction and professional literature and periodicals, language habits and environment. Surprisingly, children who have never studied Russian at school understand and communicate in it pretty well due to its presence everywhere.

### **Foreign Languages vs. Russian**

Complex interplay between politics and practice in the second language education and use in Ukraine is closely connected with foreign language education policy. Since 1932, foreign language (German, French, English or, since 1947, Spanish) officially became a compulsory component of school curriculum, and now it is a state-required subject at primary, secondary, and tertiary educational levels. It is also mandatory for post-graduate programs, and a B2 level certificate in a foreign language is a requirement for gaining a professor diploma.

In some regions of Ukraine that border on Central European states, the languages of neighbours with whom Ukrainians share many historical developments, national roots and cultural traditions are popular - Polish, Romanian, Hungarian. In other regions of the state, languages of ethnic groups that have inhabited the country for centuries are taught: Crimean-Tatar, Moldavian, Bulgarian, Romaic, Slovak, Turkish, Greek etc. Apart from schools, cultural-educational centres or Sunday schools take care of minority languages. The status of regional and minority languages as native, heritage, second or foreign languages cannot be strictly defined, since it depends on individual motives and priorities, family traditions, local language situations, etc. For example, a Ukrainian-native child may study Polish as a foreign language together with classmates for whom Polish is a heritage language. However, the commitment to provide education in regional and minority languages wherever desired by parents and pupils has a deep social potential and significance for building a democratic multicultural state with respect for cultural and linguistic diversity.

In 2013, at the time of the pro-Russian president Yanukovich, the Ministry of Education and Science issued an order for compulsory study in schools from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of a second foreign language. It was specified that it could be any foreign language, or Russian, or another language of national minorities. The Education Department has gathered preliminary information on what kind of language 5<sup>th</sup> grade pupils would study as a second foreign language in each school. According to these data, 52% of schools have chosen German; 23%, Russian; 14%, French; 8%, English; 2%, Polish; 1% Spanish (Rossiyska, 2013). As educators themselves

have told, at various meetings they were strongly encouraged to choose Russian as a second foreign language. For some schools, especially in villages, due to the lack of specialists who knew European languages, the choice of Russian as the second foreign could become the only way out. The public and representatives of Parliament immediately expressed their disagreement. They argued that such an order was another manipulation of public consciousness, and emphasized that instead of a second foreign language, the school-children would learn the language they already knew well. Thus, the Ministry actually narrowed, not extended, their starting life possibilities.

After the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 and new Presidential and Parliament elections, the focus in the state language policy was shifted in the direction of English as the second language in importance after the official (Ukrainian) language. At the moment, there was a vast industry of foreign-language teaching in Ukraine with clearly evident dedication to the English language learning, and a generation of motivated English-language learners. English was studied by about 90% of all schoolchildren. Thus, as a counterbalance to attempts to reinforce the status of Russian through posing it as a second foreign language, calls were made for the introduction of English as a second language, a language that would help Ukrainians better to get to know other cultures instead of Soviet and post-Soviet. The Minister of Education and Science in the new government stressed that the state should create conditions for any language to develop, but the government would intend to pay special attention to the state language and English.

The year 2016 was declared the Year of the English language in Ukraine, as stated in the Decree, “considering the role of English as a language of international communication, in order to facilitate its study to increase citizens’ access to world economic, social, educational and cultural opportunities that the knowledge and use of English opens up, ensuring the integration of Ukraine into the European political, economic and scientific and educational area, in support of the Go Global program, which defines the study of English as one of the priorities of the developmental strategy” (Ukaz, 2016). The position of English as a global language that helps Ukraine in its aspiration to integrate with the democratic world is steadily growing - especially from the perspective of its role as a counterbalance to Russian as the language of a hostile country that actually contributes to the collapse of Ukraine as an independent state and fuels fighting in Eastern Ukraine, being directly involved in it.

### **Conclusions**

As the case of Ukraine proves, both at the state and individual levels, the choice of a second or foreign language for educational purposes is strongly intertwined with the state politics and ideologies, inter-state relations, national self-identification strivings. It is a very delicate sphere able to hide or reveal identity conflicts.

Historical experience shows that an attempt to replace the native language with a second language by, for example, artificial creation of a strange concept of “the second native language”, may for some time cause a serious dissonance in the national identity of the whole nation living in a totalitarian state regime. However,



if the society chooses a democratic way of development, such a policy can lead to the rejection of the language imposed in this way not only as a state language, but generally as a means of daily communication.

Foreign language education, as well as education in regional and minority languages, helps learners to reflect on their own and others' social and cultural identity, and serves as a good counterbalance to addiction to domination of one imposed language.

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