

# The phenomenon of Russian-Ukrainian bilingualism and multicodeality as a language portrait of modern Ukrainian language situation

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*Abstract:* The current linguistic situation in Ukraine, which has evolved over the course of several centuries, presents itself as a unique subject for linguistic description and study, differing substantially from analogous examples elsewhere in the Slavic world. Given article deals with still not described in details topic in modern Russian and Slavic Studies, that is functioning of Russian in the capital city – Kiev and the large cities of Ukraine, which de facto have always been and still stay Russian speaking with the exception of Western regions of the country. The study is also devoted to viewing such a phenomenon as a form of linguistic interference within the mixing of two closely related languages.

*Keywords:* Ukrainian, Russian, surzhyk, Russian-Ukrainian bilingualism, urban dialect, language code, Ukrainian language situation, language assimilation, inter-Slavic interference

1. Formulating the research problem. The centuries-old historical and cultural coexistence of two closely related Slavic peoples led to the inter-lingual Ukrainian-Russian convergence process, which is primarily manifested in the lexical composition of both languages.

This report discusses the linguistic multicodeality of the present-day urban dialect with concrete examples from actual non-staged speech found in different Ukraine's regions. The Russian speech of Kievans and citizens of the major cities of Ukraine along with Russian-Ukrainian bilingualism, the switching of language codes, the marking of their social prestige, the various forms of the manifestation of *surzhyk* (i.e. mixed sociolects of Russian-Ukrainian languages), the linguistic and sociolinguistic function of Russian colloquialisms in everyday speech all constitute unique traits of the city's urban dialect.

2. Research techniques. Our observations are based on empirical material collected in the course of field research of the city interdialects. The data we have acquired allows us to make a maximally objective systemic description of the functioning of Russian (including Russian

colloquialisms) in the speech of Ukrainians. Along with this, the social status of the aforementioned codes has been established, and the reasons for the code switching from one language to the other has been identified. We have also included an analysis of the possibilities for such switching (as well as a description of the communicative situations that are linked with this phenomenon).

3. The language situation in present-day Ukraine could be considered as quite a unique phenomenon in the whole Slavic world, since the language that has been officially proclaimed for many decades often differs greatly from what is actually spoken. The language situation is complicated by many other factors, including, ethnic, cultural, socio-political and historical, as well as the degree of national identity of native speakers and regional heterogeneity. It is often said (and it exists as a stereotype), that there are not two: Left- and Right Bank Ukraine. A famous Ukrainian historian Jaroslav Hrytsak said more precisely: there are not two Ukraine, but there are twenty two Ukraines [Hrytsak 2002].

It is hardly possible to give a completely accurate assessment of the real language situation in Ukraine, for any statistical data, official proclamations or linguistic approaches to the interpretation of modern “language reality” mostly have just an emotional, evaluative character. It is caused by a number of extralinguistic factors and modern political and ideological challenges, that have nothing to do with the real language reality.

The forming of the Ukrainian “language identity” and language situation stays still influenced by many both purely linguistic and extralinguistic factors. Among them we should mention before all the long-term historical, political and cultural neighborhood with closely related Russian language area within the East Slavic area, and due to this mutual influence and interpenetration of two languages – Russian and Ukrainian. On the other hand, Ukrainian (especially western dialects) was influenced by Polish in the Western part of the country (as well as Slovak in Transcarpathia region (the Zakarpatska Oblast, Uzhhorod)). We also should mention the fact of the existence in the south of Ukraine (in particular in Odessa) the special form of the Russian language, which experienced a significant impact from Yiddish. To the extralinguistic factors we may attribute coexistence both of Russia and Ukraine as main and sufficient parts of thy Russian Empire and later Soviet Union. As a result, during Soviet and early post-Soviet period Ukrainian mass culture was noticeably influenced by Russian mass art, primarily cinema and modern pop-music.

The complexity of the description of the modern Ukrainian language situation is that it is impossible to talk with certainty about any universals and make unambiguous conclusions regarding the territory

of the whole country. The territory of modern Ukraine is a many-sided palette with linguistic, cultural, religious, historical and ethnographic points of view. Historically, the modern Ukrainian territories belonged to different countries, empires, political and religious sphere of influence, which is one of the primary reasons why Ukrainians are heterogeneous in their mentality, degree of national self-identity and, as a result, in any given choice of a particular language code for colloquial, everyday communication, which is due to both regional identity and the various historical past of the east and west of Ukraine, geographical position of the country and separate regions, that is, proximity to Russian or European culture [Csernicskó, Máté 2017, p. 14].

One of the main problems we face in Ukrainian studies is the coexistence of the Ukrainian and Russian languages, often in the linguistic palette of one speaker, complicated either by bilingualism, or by interference (interaction), i.e. complete confusion and non-distinction in the speaker's mind of two closely related Russian and Ukrainian languages which leads to the emergence of so-called sublanguage – *surzhyk*.

Moreover it's possible to speak about certain kinds of Ukrainian bilingualism: Russian-speaking Ukrainians or Ukrainians who mostly use in everyday communication the Russian-Ukrainian mixture – *surzhyk* can more or less correctly (actively or often passively) speak the literary Ukrainian language (with the exception of some regions of Eastern and Southern Ukraine), using it exclusively in official, formal communication [Striha 1998, 638], [Tomilenko 2014, p. 71]. On the other hand, Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians in a varying degree can speak Russian as well, depending on the region they live in, and use it in communication with Russians or finding themselves in the society of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. So, both Russian / *surzhyk* and Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians can “switch language code of communication” depending on the certain communicative situation. One more important factor for the modern language situation is the knowledge a speaker has of Russian culture, not only elitist, *high culture*, but also *low culture*, which in large quantities is still absorbed by the masses, which cannot but affect the language of everyday communication.

At the same time, as for the Ukrainian language itself, the point is that relationships between different forms of language and subsystems are far from uniform: they vary geographically, depending on the region, the degree of education of native speakers and the degree of national self-identification, age, social status and understanding of so-called linguistic prestige, as well as the regionally linguistically determined opposition: “own” and “alien”, in concordance with the use of the given language. Generally speaking, the language of everyday communication (or language code), as well as the language situation of the capital city Kyiv

differs from the language situation in southern Ukraine, the language of dwellers in Western Ukrainian city of Lviv extremely differs from the language of the city of Odessa, the language of Kharkiv in the pro Russian Eastern part from the language of Transcarpathia in the Southwest (where we can meet the correct literary Russian language as a trace of Russian white emigration of the early twentieth century, who traveled through this region on their way to Western Europe), etc.

Ukrainian bilingualism is characterized by the fact of coexistence of two languages – Russian and Ukrainian in active or passive forms – in the language portrait of the majority of speakers, including the abovementioned *surzhyk*. The use of the concrete language depends on some factors, for example: in large cities until now they mostly speak Russian or *surzhyk* in Central, Eastern and Southern parts of the country. Ukrainian still stays “the language of the countryside people”. Russian is normally used in communication with Russians or Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Even in western regions Ukrainian-speaking people “switch their code” from Ukrainian to Russian to be understood and not to be considered as a “alien” in “non-Ukrainian language environment”.

Let us now look at the main forms of existence and coexistence of the languages (resp. language codes) on the territory of modern Ukraine.

I. The Russian language in Ukraine, first of all, is the language of Russians living in its territory, which make up about 20% of its population. For most, the native language remains the Russian literary language; according to official statistics only 3.8% of Russians consider Ukrainian their mother tongue. It is worth emphasizing the current trend of the transition to the Ukrainian language by Russians permanently residing in Ukraine and working in the field of culture, art and the Mass media. As Csernicškó and Fedinec mentioned, Russian speakers stand out considerably from among the various language communities [Csernicškó, Fedinec 2016, p. 573].

For a long time, Left-Bank Ukraine was heavily influenced by Russian culture, literature, language, first of all it was violent Russification, assimilation (the prohibition of teaching in Ukrainian, the prohibition of publishing books, the removal of the Ukrainian language from all areas of official communication and the education system). A result of all these processes was Russification of the language of the south-eastern and central parts of Ukraine, primarily the urban population, a decrease in the degree of self-identification, and lowered self-esteem in comparison with other peoples.

The Russian language used by Ukrainians in southwestern regions in the everyday colloquial sphere of communication and as a colloquial option can be considered Russian only in a very relative

sense. Moreover, literary Russian and standardized Russian intonation are often perceived by Ukrainians, native speakers of “their own” Russian language, as “Moscow”, “Moscow accent”, and, therefore, “alien”. The Russian language bears the characteristic imprint of the Ukrainian one, due to a mixture of two close-related languages, as well as the linguistic negligence of an average Ukrainian speaker. Such “Ukrainian” elements in this “Ukrainian” type of Russian can be considered as the framework of a linguistic and a personal perception of “own” – “alien” (such a variant is used by “own” in contrast from a “alien” literary Ukrainian language or “Moscow accent”).

So, Ukrainian is used in western and southern Ukraine mostly in rural areas, mainly as a dialect or as a *surzhyk*. As for large regional, cultural, industrial, administrative centers (Kharkiv, Mariupol, Dnipro, Odessa, Zaporizhia, Kryvyi Rih, Cherkasy, Mykolaiv, etc.), they are mostly Russian-speaking (“Ukrainian Russian” and *surzhyk*).

The status of the literary Ukrainian language in Eastern and Southern Ukraine is socially limited: it is the language of creative intellectuals: writers, poets, artistic circles, as well as people with a high degree of national identity, a number of officials who use the Ukrainian language in official communication, or immigrants from villages, who speak Eastern Ukrainian dialects.

A special position in the language picture of the southeastern regions is held by the language of Odessa, which can be called a kind of city koine and was formed as a result of many centuries of coexistence and interpenetration of different cultures and languages, primarily Ukrainian, Russian, Romanian / Moldavian and Yiddish. Strictly speaking, in its form it is colloquial Russian, but in a form that is not found in Russia (in general, the “Odessa language code” is very recognizable and popular in modern Russian culture and acts as a means of creating a humorous effect).

II. The language situation in Central Ukraine is partly similar to the southern and eastern regions. It is characterized by a predominance of the Russian language primarily in large cities (Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipro etc.), as well as central Ukrainian dialects of rural areas, Ukrainian-Russian dialects on the North and East (Chernihiv, Sumy).

In comparison with the eastern and southern parts, the language situation in the central part is influenced by two of the most important factors: 1) the specifics of the language situation in Kiev, 2) the spread of *surzhyk*.

We would like to especially emphasize that *surzhyk* is a kind of a certain sublanguage, or language substrate, formed as a result of the interference of the Ukrainian and Russian languages [Kent 2010]. It is generally recognized, that *surzhyk* as a linguistic phenomenon separate from Ukrainian and Russian, dates back to the 17th – 18th centuries [Masenko 2008].

The word *surzhyk* originally referred to 1) a mixture of different grains with rye, a mixture of wheat and rye grains, rye and barley, barley and oats; 2. Elements of two or more languages, artificially combined, without observing literary standards [SUM 1978, p. 854]. The origin of *surzhyk* is connected with development of the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian-Russian language contacts caused by geographical proximity and colonization of Ukraine [Kent 2010, p. 38]. The Ukrainian linguist M. Striha interprets *surzhyk* as an intermediate sublanguage, which plays the role of a transitional stage in the assimilative process of crowding out the Ukrainian language with Russian [Striha 1998, p. 637]. Moreover, the proportions of elements taken from both languages in this substrate vary and depend on the region, the level of educational attainment of the speaker, as well as social and other conditions [Trub 2000, p. 54].

*Surzhyk* is mostly used by people, who do not fluently speak either Ukrainian or Russian. They use this form of language as a colloquial form for everyday informal communication. The number of its users is estimated from 20 to 30% [Fedinec, Csernicškó, p. 85].

As for the specifics of the language of Kievans, this phenomenon should be examined separately. Here we will only mention that in Kyiv we can observe a strict distinction between the functional areas of use of the Russian and Ukrainian languages – official and everyday colloquial speech. The sphere of informal, friendly communication is covered by the Russian language, and in the field of official communication the Ukrainian literary language is used [Kuznetsova, Savchenko, Khmelevskiy 2018, p. 95]. This is a typical, but not universal situation, because in such functions oppositions may be used *surzhyk* vs. the Ukrainian literary language, Russian vs. *surzhyk*. Often this opposition does not arise at all, and exclusively Russian or exclusively *surzhyk* is used in all areas [Taranenko 2001, p. 14; Taranenko 2008, p. 20].

The Ukrainian language, as in other large Ukrainian cities, it is the language of intellectuals, Kiev intelligentsia, teachers, educated people and ordinary urban residents with a high degree of national identity. They use the literary Ukrainian language not only in official, but also in everyday communication. It is also important to emphasize the trend to switch language codes, i.e. changing languages during one and the same communicative act.

III. Colloquial language in Western Ukraine is stereotyped by Ukrainians from the eastern, southern and partially central regions of the country as polonized, dialectic, “alien”, i.e. “not our, not true Ukraine”. In reality, it is a region where the Ukrainian language is normally used in all areas of communication. The variant of the Ukrainian language spoken in this part of the country is “the most standardized”, very close to the literary Ukrainian, or rather, the colloquial version of the literary

language (including in large cities, administrative, economic and cultural centers).

The language situation in Western Ukraine is complicated by 1) a variety of dialects – mainly used by rural residents, 2) a local variant of *surzhyk* which mostly includes elements of the Ukrainian language (unlike variant of *surzhyk* in central and eastern regions), 3) a special Lviv city koine, 4) a special function of the Russian language, which is used as a common parlance or jargon in the speech of native Ukrainian literary language.

As for the language of the city of Lviv, this is a rather complex question. Lviv as a cultural, administrative, industrial and military center of the west of Ukraine is quite heterogeneous: indigenous Lviv dwellers, Ukrainians from the western, central, eastern regions, Russians (often former men of arms), Poles.

The national and linguistic diversity of Lviv is reflected primarily in the language situation of the city: here one can hear both pure Ukrainian language (primarily among representatives of highly educated layers of society) and Ukrainian speech with interspersed quotations, clichés and idioms from Russian (especially in emotional, ironic contexts in colloquial speech), as well as Western Ukrainian dialects (Ukrainians from other regions of Western Ukraine), specific Lviv city koine (mainly among the older generation of indigenous residents of Lviv). Not so often we can meet *surzhyk* in the speech of small-scale traders, service workers, and newcomers, more seldom the Russian language.

In Western Ukraine the switching of the language code is quite rare, the Ukrainian literary language can switch by speaker to Russian or Polish, wanting to be understood by a Russian-speaking or Polish-speaking interlocutor, but never in communication with those, who speak *surzhyk* or Lviv koine.

The language diversity of Lviv is opposed to the relative heteroglossia of other regions of Western Ukraine. For example, in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopol habitants use the standard Ukrainian language (sometimes with the elements of local dialects) in both official and everyday informal communication.

National self-identification in Western Ukraine is pretty high, and the perception of the rest of Ukraine (including Central Ukraine and capital city Kiev) among Western Ukrainians is diametrically opposed to the perception of southeastern Ukrainians by the West: this is a dismissive attitude to Eastern, Southern and Central Ukrainians as “forgetting the original traditions, faith, language”.

IV. With regards to the peculiarities of the functioning of Russian in the speech of Ukrainian speaking Ukrainians we should briefly highlight the three most considerable aspects:

1) inclusion into the Ukrainian colloquial speech of Russian translated loan-words, quotations, clichés, or so-called catchphrases. It could be partly explained by the problem of insufficiently developed Ukrainian spoken language, Ukrainian both vernacular, and literary language as well as insufficient lexical and stylistic development of the language of everyday communication. Such “insertions” are very characteristic for the colloquial speech, often they depend on the degree of free-and-easy vibe of the communicative situation [Savchenko, Khmelevskiy 2008, p. 177]. It is a sphere of the language that has a high need for expressive elements and the lack, shortcoming of lexical elements, expressive and metaphorical means in the Ukrainian language in compare with Russian prevents the development of the everyday colloquial Ukrainian language.

This phenomenon, however, should be distinguished from *surzhyk*, since this is not a spontaneous mixing of two closely related languages, but the intentional dissemination of Russian clichés and quotations from the literature and Russian mass culture (including the language of blocks of commercials), as well as pejorative, vulgar vocabulary, to create different stylistic effects, before all, humorous effect, to create atmosphere of ease and freedom (free-and-easy vibe) in communication at the everyday colloquial level. As for *surzhyk*, K. Kent concluded that, from a morphosyntactic perspective *surzhyk* could be best described as composite codeswitching. However, its speakers did not display a bilingual command of both Ukrainian and Russian languages, an important requirement for codeswitching [Kent 2010, p. 51].

2) Closely connected with previous observing is the fact of usage of Russian in colloquial speech as an element of irony, sarcasm, to create and emphasize special stylistic contrasts and nuances of pragmatic usage in the utterance.

3) Communicative situations, when Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians switch their language code to the Russian language. This phenomenon is not common, but mostly it is found, according to our observations, among young people. For the Ukrainian youth the use of the Russian language as a means of colloquial communication performs the function of argot, jargon, student slang, thieves language code [Khmelevskiy 2017, p. 101]. In this function the Russian language among Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians is a marker of one’s own member: the representative, member of the same informal youth community to contrast with the “alien”, who speaks Ukrainian. The Russian language in this case also covers certain “lacunas” of (criminal) slang, spoken expressions (including expressive, invective) missing in colloquial Ukrainian.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned the following:

1. Despite official statistics of the Ukrainian-speaking population on the level 60–70%, the Ukrainian language remains, in fact, the language



of the countryside and the language of the intelligentsia, the university environment and the political elite, which in percentage terms are significantly inferior to the number of average residents of Ukraine.

In actuality, according to the results of our field researches, the large cities of Central and Southeast Ukraine, until now remain mostly Russian-speaking. In Kyiv, Dnipro, Kharkiv, Vinnytsia, Cherkasy and other cities one can find theater plays and city round tour in Russian.

2. It is worth noting the fact that, speaking pure Ukrainian in the central and southeastern regions of Ukraine, it is often possible to remain incompletely understood by other people who speak *surzhyk* or “Ukrainian Russian”. *De facto* Russian in the major cities of Central and Eastern Ukraine is still the language of everyday communication. At the same time, speakers, being bilingual, in the course of official opinion polls indicate the Ukrainian language as their native language for either political or ideological reasons.

3. Russian, due to a number of objective reasons (social, political and historical), has become in Ukraine the language of everyday communication, the “language of the market”. Low-quality print media, film production, the yellow press, pop culture, etc. come from Russia and exert an influence on the language of everyday communication. According to Csernicskó and Máté, “the majority of public language domains, it is still Russian that prevails, especially in the media and the economy, but the use of Ukrainian is not exclusive even in public administration” [Csernicskó, Máté 2017, p. 28].

It is worth paying attention to the fact that the influence of modern elite Ukrainian culture on the masses is relatively small compared with the large-scale impact of Russian-speaking mass culture, which is many times greater than the first in quantitative terms, while the Ukrainian-speaking intelligentsia, creative intellectuals themselves remain the primary and nearly sole consumer of modern elite Ukrainian culture.

As was already mentioned, a very important role is played by this element of penetration into everyday life of mass Russian culture, the yellow press, and Russian pop-music, which in the central and southeastern regions of Ukraine significantly outnumber the Ukrainian-language cultural background, especially in Central and Southeast Ukraine.

4. It should be noted, that recent time in connection with current political events, which in a considerable degree changed the attitude of Ukrainians towards their native language, we can observe the increase of national self-awareness in society, an increase of prestige of the Ukrainian language, a rethinking of the attitude towards national culture and identity, history, national originality and folklore traditions.

However, contemporary Ukraine language situation faces with the problem of the official status of the Russian language and other minority languages: “A considerable portion of the Ukrainian political and societal elite is against not only Russian gaining official status nationally but also the official use of minority languages regionally, even though official bilingual language use at the regional level is not without precedent in the territory of Ukraine” [Csernicskó, Fedinec 2016, p. 576]. The present-day Ukrainian linguists are mostly of opinion, that those who propagandize bilingualism use Ukrainian as a decorative mask in linguistically schizophrenic situations, and in fact seek a Russian-speaking monolingualism [Csernicskó, Máté 2017, p. 14]. As illustration can also be given the statement of L. Masenko, who believes, that “the Russian language is the chain that bounds Ukraine to the Communist past” [Masenko 2016, p. 14]. Extension of the scope of use of the Ukrainian language, the obstruction of the Russian language is considered by many as a split from the colonial past Soviet era and means freedom and independence [Csernicskó, Máté 2017, p. 26].

The current activity in the language sphere conducting by both political circles and public figures, as well as people with a high degree of national identity, aimed at updating the Ukrainian-language culture and increasing the status and prestige of the Ukrainian language in modern society.

### *Gratitude*

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