

Language Ideologies and the Media in Post-Soviet Ukraine

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Language ideologies, normality, and the media

Before I speak of language ideologies, I would like to say a few words about ideologies in general. Together with many other scholars, I use this term in the broad sense of beliefs reflecting social positions and interests. Therefore, I treat ideologies as not necessary coherent and not always consciously held. Of particular interest for me is the Gramscian view of the relationship between ideology and common sense and the contribution of naturalized ideologies to the sustainability of unequal power relations. Ideologies are often presented as common sense and in this way they stand better chance of getting accepted, since they are not perceived as serving anybody's interests. Further, common sense not so much prescribes one option (a norm) as accepts a range of possible options deemed to be normal. In my use of the notion of normality, I follow the German literary scholar Jürgen Link (1999) who conceptualizes it as a Gaussian distribution on the spectrum of possible values of a given variable, where probability means the degree of normality which is the highest in the middle and decreases toward the limits. In other words, what is perceived as normal is widespread and therefore acceptable, not requiring any intervention. And what is not problematized is assumed to be normal, which is why the media is so important in the production of normality. This means that we should look for ideologies not only in overt opinions but also in seemingly neutral statements, such as news reports.

As far as language ideologies are concerned, the crucial factor that needs to be taken into account is that these ideologies are embodied both in judgments about language and in its usage. Moreover, while all ideologies are at the same time descriptive and prescriptive, here we should pay attention both to beliefs on what does take place and what should take place as well as to the embodiment of the two in language practice. Of the three aspects

of language that language ideologies deal with – nature, structure, and use – I will mostly be preoccupied with the third, but I am aware of an intrinsic connection between the beliefs regarding the actual and desirable use of specific language varieties and their identification, communicative, aesthetic and other values. Although in practice they are intertwined, we can analytically separate the assessments of specific values and isolate ideologies prioritizing one of them over others.

My typology includes ideologies of identification, understanding, and purity. The first of them stresses the role/value of language as an important marker of group identity, first and foremost of national one, and presupposes/prescribes a one-to-one correspondence between nations and their eponymous languages. This relationship is vividly presented in the metaphor of language as a treasure, which underlines the imperative for an individual to use the supposed language of his/her group. In contrast, the ideology of understanding (or communication) sees language primarily as a conduit for conveying information and thus prescribes the use of a language that is best understood for all participants in a given communication act (or the use of translation there is no such common language). The differentiation between these ideologies is similar to the dichotomy of language ideologies of authenticity and anonymity presented by [Woolard \(2005\)](#); see also Gal and Woolard 2001). To these two, I add the ideology of purity which translates the notion of authenticity into the imperative of the correspondence of language varieties and forms to a standard seen as an embodiment of the nation's true essence. In particular, some varieties called languages are deemed to be legitimate and valuable means of self-expression of respective nations, while others' lesser value and lack of legitimacy is reflected in their statuses as dialects or mixtures or impure speech. The ideology of purity is prominent in beliefs dealing with the evaluation of the quality of speech and attitudes towards perceived dialects and mixtures, such as Ukrainian-Russian mixed speech called *surzhyk*, which has most extensively been studied by Bilaniuk (e.g. 1997, 2006). As my focus here will be on beliefs pertaining to the choice between (labeled) languages, I will only deal with the ideologies of identification and understanding.

The media is a crucial site, on the one hand, of the overt articulation of various ideologies and the competition between them (e.g. in opinion articles and talk shows) and, on the other, of the covert embodiment and the naturalization of dominant ideologies (e.g. in

news reports and entertainment programs). In particular, the media produces normality by presenting ever new events and mostly not seeing them as manifestations of problems or sometimes even as results of anybody's actions. By just reporting on something briefly and immediately proceeding to speaking about something else, media discourse presents such events as just normal, not requiring the audience's reflection, still less intervention. In doing so, this discourse contributes to the naturalization of dominant ideologies and the legitimization of the established social order.

In case of language ideologies, the media embodies them, on the one hand, by representing social actors' judgments and expressing journalist' ones and, on the other, by representing actors' language use and practicing language in journalists' texts and speech. While presenting actors' judgments and language use, journalists may articulate their views thereof, and my argument is that the lack of such articulation implies acceptability/normality of the presented beliefs and practices. As for the language usage of journalists themselves, it is particularly important for my analysis to take into account the following aspects. First, this usage is usually oriented towards standard versions of respective languages thus embodying the ideologies of purity and identification. It is with the standard that the audience is invited to identify rather than with dialects, mixtures or professional jargons which are only used for this purpose in certain practices, even if those varieties are actively used by that audience (e.g. Pavlou 2004). Second, by using only one language, the media identifies with it as the language of its audience and, by implication, its community/nation. At the same time, the use of this language may be perceived as caused primarily by the fact that all members of the audience (best) understand it, although this fact is, of courser, (re)created by its use in the media and other practices. Therefore, both ideologies of identification and understanding are at work in this practice, competing for meanings to be attributed to particular languages and patterns of use. Third, when several languages are used, they are all presented (usually implicitly) as acceptable for the audience/community but hierarchal relations are established between them due to unequal scopes of use which both reflect those languages' social statuses and influence them (Spitulnik 1992). Here again, both ideologies of identification and understanding are drawn upon and reproduced, with the primacy of one or the other being determined, in my view, by the use of each language in

the media products either for a segregated audience of its native speakers who are believed/made to identify with it, or for a wider audience of those who are believed/made to understand that language. I hope to show these effects in the language practices of the Ukrainian media.

Language use and language ideologies in Ukraine

Ukraine can be considered a rather atypical country, at least for Europe, in view of the discrepancy between linguistic and ethnic identities of the population and between each of these identities and patterns of everyday language use. Ethnically, it is similar to East-Central European countries such as Slovakia, Romania or Lithuania where the respective titular group is a clear majority but other groups constitute a considerable share of the population. According to the results of the first post-Soviet census conducted in 2001, 77.8 per cent of Ukrainian residents declared their “nationality” to be Ukrainian, 17.3 per cent Russian and 4.9 per cent other. Given that the former Soviet definition of “nationality” as an inherited and, therefore, fixed characteristics of an individual loses its prevalence due to the Ukrainian state’s discontinuation of its institutionalization in internal passports, ever more people define their (ethno)national identity as tautological to citizenship. In the 2001 census, a number of people defining themselves as Russians dropped by more than a quarter in comparison with the last Soviet census of 1989 [Derzhavnyi komitet].

This identity shift is not accompanied by a similar change of identification with Ukrainian as “native language”. In the last Soviet decades, an increasing number of those categorized in passports and censuses as Ukrainians had declared their native language to be Russian, the language of social prestige and political loyalty in Ukrainian SSR and most other parts of the Soviet Union. Many more people kept declaring their “native language” to be Ukrainian but switched to Russian in everyday use, sometimes to a point of little knowledge of the supposed language of their group (Szporluk 1981; Kulyk 2001). While the number of self-declared native speakers of Ukrainian somewhat increased in the 2001 census (to 67.5 per cent, with the share of those of Russian dropping to 29.3 per cent) [Derzhavnyi komitet], a gap between this increase and that of self-declared ethnic

Ukrainians meant that a percentage of those Ukrainians who considered Ukrainian their native language actually slightly decreased.

However, the discrepancy between ethnic and linguistic identifications is not nearly as big as between the latter and everyday language preferences of the population. These preferences which had steadily changed towards greater use of Russian in the Soviet decades, have been very slowly, if at all, reversing after the proclamation of Ukraine's independence, as Russian has retained much of its prestige and there has been little pressure on the citizens to switch to the state language, Ukrainian. According to a series of surveys that have been conducted annually since 1991 by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology and used the category of "language of preference", the percentage of people preferring Ukrainian in their everyday use is lower than one half of all the population (e.g. Arel 1995). For example, the series' average data for the years of 2000 to 2003 put the share of Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians at 45.4 per cent, with those of Russian-speaking Ukrainians at 30.9 per cent, Russian-speaking Russians at 16.5 per cent, and others at 7.2 per cent (Khmelko 2004). This huge discrepancy means that up to a quarter of Ukrainian citizens combine an attachment to Ukrainian as "native language" and the preference for Russian in their everyday use. In the former case, an underlying language ideology is that of identification; in the latter, that of understanding.

My typology of most influential language ideologies in Ukrainian public discourse is based on ethnolinguistic groups whose rights and interests they overtly or covertly defend. I call two of these ideologies Ukrainophone and Russophone, but the terms do not imply an automatic correspondence between the ethnolinguistic identity of ideologues and the group they seek to represent. The Ukrainophones assume the priority of ethnicity in an individual's identity and, accordingly, speak about "Ukrainians" rather than "Ukrainian-speakers". However, Ukrainians are assumed to unanimously speak their eponymous language, or want to speak it if they happen to use mostly Russian due to the former policies of Russification. Therefore, this ideology calls for the status of Ukrainian as the sole official language and its dominance in all public fields and for a purely minority scope of the use of Russian. In contrast, the Russophone ideology considers the

language of everyday use the primary determinant of ethnocultural identity and, accordingly, speaks on behalf of the “Russian-speaking population” regardless of its “nationality” or “native language”. This entire population is assumed to want to adhere to its language of everyday use and oppose any policies intended to enhance the use of Ukrainian, to say nothing of making it mandatory. The Russophones call for virtually equal statuses of the two languages and deny their opponents’ argument that, given advantageous starting conditions of the Russian-speakers, such formal equality would perpetuate this advantage and the actual discrimination against the speakers of Ukrainian (Kulyk 2004). Each of these ideologies emphasizes one part of contradictory beliefs of the Ukrainian population (Kulyk forthcoming), in particular those who consider Ukrainian their native language but prefer Russian in their everyday use, and downplays the other part. While Ukrainophones only recognize the legitimacy of the ideology of identification which makes these people retain their attachment to Ukrainian, the Russophones prioritize the ideology of understanding which encourages many Ukrainian citizens to continue preferring Russian in their everyday life.

However, the two above-described ideologies have been largely marginalized for the independence years due to the growing influence of the so-called centrism which presents itself as a non-ideological position based on common sense and thus shared by virtually all members of society. Unlike its rivals, this ideology does not seek to defend the interests of one of Ukraine’s ethnolinguistic groups but rather of the entire population whose interests it does not see as determined by linguistic, ethnic or, indeed, any other group identities. In other words, the population is believed to be ideologically homogenous even if culturally diverse. In particular, it is assumed to know and accept both languages and, therefore, to consider language use neither a social problem nor, accordingly, a political one. The centrist ideology, on the one hand, allies with the Ukrainophones in that Ukrainian should be the only official language and, on the other, with the Russophones in that Russian should be accepted as, along with Ukrainian, a language of most public practices. It supports the status of Ukrainian as the language of the state and, symbolically, *the* language of the nation/country and, at the same time, grants Russian the status of one of the two legitimate languages of society if not the primary one (Kulyk 2004a; forthcoming). While recognizing the legitimacy both of

ideologies of identification and understanding, centrism distorts the popular beliefs in that it assumes, in effect, a homogenous combination of the two elements in the consciousness and identity of every member of Ukrainian society rather than admitting a regional and social heterogeneity with the prevalence of one of the elements in some segments of the population. While the Ukrainophone and, to a lesser extent, Russophone ideologies have been embodied in politics, education, churches and some other fields, it is centrism that for the last decade became hegemonic in those institutional practices which exert the most powerful influence on popular beliefs about language. Among these practices, the media is perhaps the most important.

Media discourse and practice as the embodiment of centrist ideology

Prior to focusing on the discourse on language and the practice of language use in the Ukrainian media, I would like to mention some features of this media which make it particularly suitable for the normalization of events and processes reported on and the naturalization of their underlying ideologies. The very genre and style structure of Ukrainian media discourse, largely due to the repressive media policies of the regime of the former President Leonid Kuchma (1994-2004) and the resulting reluctance of the journalist/editors to criticize the words and deeds by the authorities (Riabchuk 2001; Dyczok 2003), virtually excludes problematization of the reported “facts” which thus stand good chance of being perceived as just normal, not caused by anybody’s actions or at least not requiring anybody’s intervention. News bulletins on television and news reports in newspapers provide very little background information and few, if any, expert opinions, while the positions of both/all parties involved are only presented in the most important or obviously controversial cases. Moreover, the views of journalists are rarely explicitly articulated and those of the politicians and officials rarely commented on, as there are no editorials, few opinion articles or letters to the editors in the newspapers, and few talk shows on political or cultural issues on TV. In general, “serious” issues occupy a rather limited place in media discourse which is primarily oriented towards entertainment. After the Orange Revolution of late 2004 and the ensuing change of the regime, the freedom of the press has markedly expanded and the media has become more critical of the authorities, but this change has not so far been matched by an adequate increase in the plurality of represented voices and a critical interest in social problems.

The media discourse on language and issues somehow related to it contributed to the naturalization of the centrist ideology by assuming and, at the same time, producing the normality of both the role of Ukrainian as the only/primary language of the state and nation/society and the (equal) acceptability of the two main languages. In both cases, positive non-problematizing reports on language-related events were the primary practice where the respective normality was manifested and reinforced. On the one hand, Ukrainian was presented not only as the language of the state's functioning and concern, but also as the language of society, similar to the titular languages of established nation-states where the media has been shown to significantly contribute to the (re)production of the population's "banal nationalism" (Billing 1995). Not only did the newspapers and TV stations reported, usually without any comments, on governmental statements and actions regarding the promotion of the use of the state language, but also they routinely informed their audiences about social and cultural events related to Ukrainian rather than Russian or any other language, such as the publication of the translation of a new book of the Harry Potter series. Similarly, a plan to change the language of instruction in schools from Russian to Ukrainian, even if pertaining to all schools in a predominantly Russian-speaking region, could be briefly mentioned as normal news, not warranting any questions or comments, while the scarcity of newly published books in Ukrainian was often presented as a serious problem and a violation of normality. The reasons for such special treatment of the titular language were never mentioned, which means that the journalists/editors expected the readers/viewers to take it for granted. Accordingly, the roles of Ukrainian as the language of the state and that of an (ethno)linguistic group were not separated, nor were the respective scopes of social use and media interest distinguished from each other.

On the other hand, no less routine media practices implanted the view that the presence of the Russian language and culture in Ukrainian society was also normal. It is this aspect that made the (re)production of nationhood in the Ukrainian media different from the practices of established nation-states. It is true that the presentation of Russian differed significantly from that of Ukrainian. In particular, no "banal nationalism" was reproduced in this case; Russian was not implicitly presented as the only/primary language of the country or a symbolic marker of the nation. There were no news reports on the

publication of the Harry Potter books in Russian or the closure of schools with the instruction in that language. Partly the difference in media presentations reflected a difference in state policies and popular ideologies regarding the two languages. But the media also distorted social practices and attitudes which did not always prioritize Ukrainian over Russian, as in the case of the Harry Potter books which had in Ukraine perhaps more readers in the latter language than in the former and besides, the choice was for many people determined by the time of the publication and the price of a copy rather than by the language of translation.

However, this distortion in favor of Ukrainian did not amount to the exclusion of Russian and its use from those language-related events presented in media discourse. While not equal to Ukrainian in its symbolic status, Russian was presented in a number of media practices as equally acceptable or even preferable in the social interaction. The primary means of the normalization of its social role running counter to its symbolic and legal status was the omitting or backgrounding of the information on the choice of language in a reported event, which made this aspect seem irrelevant and the prevailing patterns of language use acceptable. For example, the news of the opening of a computer class in a school or the problem of scarcity of such classes in the country were usually presented without mentioning the language of the computers' interface or referring to the problem of the lack of the Ukrainian-interface computers in most of the social fields functioning in that language. Moreover, when the media reported on perceived violations of normality, the latter often appeared to provide for the equal currency of the two languages rather than the dominance of Ukrainian. In particular, the repeated discussions of the deplorable situation of the book publishing or cinema in Ukrainian referred to their *inferior* position with regard to their Russian-language counterparts, whose more-than-minority currency in Ukraine was thus assumed to be perfectly legitimate.

The normalization of the more-than-minority presence of Russian and the interchangeability of the two languages in Ukrainian society was even more effective in the language uses of the media themselves, where this normality clearly prevailed over that of the dominance of Ukrainian as the language of the state and nation. Contrary to widespread expectations of the early 1990s, Russian retained its prominence in media field in general and established a dominant position in some kinds of products that

became popular in the post-Soviet era, such as tabloid newspapers, entertainment magazines, TV series and talk shows. In the print media, most outlets published in either Ukrainian or Russian, although the share of publications in the latter was considerably higher than that of (however defined) Russian-speakers, so many people identifying with Ukrainian as native language or even preferring it in everyday practice were ready – or, given the lack of many kinds of products in that language, forced – to read in Russian. On television and radio, in contrast, the prevailing pattern was the use of both languages not only on every station where programs in one language alternate in those in the other, but also within many programs such as talk shows, news or commercials. In particular, audio or video quotes of actors' speech in a language other than that of the bulletin were not translated in news bulletins (with the exception of the state television which started in 2005 using voice-over for quoted speech in Russian), while in talk shows some or, indeed, most of the guests often spoke a language other than that of the host(s) and sometimes even the two hosts spoke different languages. These practices presupposed and imposed both Ukrainian and Russian as understandable for all members of society and not only those considering the respective language their native or preferable language. Moreover, they contributed to the naturalization of the view of both languages as equally acceptable and, therefore, of society as inherently bilingual, not in the sense of consisting of two relatively homogenous parts, but rather of the two elements being present in every member's identity.

Given the roles of Russian in Ukraine both as a language of one the groups of the population and that of a neighboring country, the normalization of its media presence in the former facilitated the normalization of its presence in the latter. Not only did the Russian talk shows and movies occupy an increasing share of Ukrainian stations' air time, but also they substituted for lacking Ukrainian analogues in the role of *domestic* products. They thus contributed to the naturalization not only of language but also of an ideology overtly or covertly establishing the cultural and political unity of post-Soviet countries and, therefore, running counter even to a moderate version of nationalism supported by the Ukrainian state. Moreover, the Russian-language movies produced in Ukraine since the early 2000s, either in cooperation with Russian companies, were presented as a national alternative to foreign production, "our movies," and the media

celebrating their appearance as an important media/cultural achievement did not even mention what language those movies used. The notion of ‘ours’ appeared to be vague and inclusive enough to enable references to the common post-Soviet or East Slavic cultural space. The normalization of Russian as the primary language of “our” media products paved the way for exclusively Ukrainian products in that language which lately began to compete with Russian analogues for markets of the two (and other post-Soviet) countries.

Taken together, the above-described media practices embodied the centrist ideology of language use normalizing both the symbolic primacy of Ukrainian and the practical equality and interchangeability of the two main languages. Moreover, these practices downplayed the importance of language issues in general as they did not discuss the compatibility of the two aspects of their perceived/produced normality, nor did they present the variety of experiences and perceptions of individuals and groups. The prominence of these practices in the media discourse on language, which reflected the centrist ideology’s dominant position in the media field in general (Kulyk forthcoming), made them an important factor influencing popular beliefs about language and language use.

Although I have not studied the receptions of media practices, I will venture some tentative conclusions regarding their social impact. I believe that, on the one hand, these practices contributed to the acceptability of Ukrainian which had not been a normal language of many social domains in late Soviet decades and, at the same time, to the failure of the radical nationalist strategy of the complete delegitimization of more-than-minority use of Russian and its expulsion from the Ukrainian public sphere. On the other hand, they failed to promote better knowledge and more active use of the titular language, which could have become an important resource of Ukraine’s post-imperial emancipation. Moreover, the effective silencing of language issues in the media contributed to the lack of public awareness of the language problem and the will and means to solve it. Finally, the media presentation of language-related processes delegitimized particular individual/group experiences and views and discouraged the perception of ethnolinguistic matters in terms of rights and the law. In brief, the media discourse contributed to social integration and stability but not to democracy.

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