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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kostiučenko, A. (2023). Surzhyk in Ukraine: Between Language Ideology and Usage. *Ukrainian Analytical Digest*, 1, 15-17. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000623475>

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

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to the Armed Forces of Ukraine for the opportunity to continue my research and complete this analysis while staying in my home country. My gratitude also goes to the Hanse Institute for Advanced Study in Delmenhorst as well as to the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies for their financial support of my research project.

ANALYSIS

Surzhyk in Ukraine: Between Language Ideology and Usage

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000623475

Abstract

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

On the Mixing of Languages in Ukraine: the Surzhyk Phenomenon

In bilingual communities, mixed languages or idioms develop through constant, intensive language contact. In Ukraine, too, there is such a mixed idiom, which is very widespread (especially in the central, eastern and southern regions of the country) and is usually called 'Surzhyk'. It is a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, traditionally referred to by the neutral term 'Ukrainian-Russian Mixed Speech' in German language academic discourse. Indeed, such a neutral term is needed because this mixed speech is not only a source of debate in academic discourse but is also particularly controversial in Ukrainian society. Its folk linguistic origins reveal that Surzhyk originally stood for a mixture of wheat and rye or flour of inferior quality. This designation was meant to imply that it was impure and less valuable. Therefore, depending on one's point of view, social attitudes towards Surzhyk imply revulsion, linguistic decay, provinciality and a 'lesser evil' than a complete transition to Russian or, instead, an association with everyday life, familiarity, creativity, skilful and comical play with words, and defeat of the rhetoric that divides society (this last association is especially strong since the protests on the Maidan in 2013/14). This spectrum is linked to

a host of extralinguistic factors, primarily in the social and political context but also to how people feel about language issues, language diversity and language policy in general. As a result, sociolinguistics distinguishes between different attitude types or speaker groups. These types or groups are, for example, language lovers, language admirers or language trivializers. According to research into attitudes on Surzhyk, these attitudes vary depending, among other things, on whether one generally agrees with language purists or not. Moreover, the covert prestige of Surzhyk (covert prestige refers to the highly respected but concealed image of a language among the speakers themselves, which then also becomes relevant for identification with a group) and its everyday use in private spheres cannot be dismissed, and both of these attributes evoke friendlier attitudes towards Surzhyk.

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

at all levels and are variable, so some studies claim that distinguishing between the primary language and the embedded language (the one added) is highly problematic or even impossible because it is questionable whether the theoretical framework of a primary and an embedded language can be applied at all.

Therefore, one point of contention is whether this massive mixture is rather chaotic and uncontrolled and represents an individual form of expression or whether it in fact has a systemic character. The latter would mean that Surzhyk would then be (socio)linguistically more autonomous, and one could speak of three main languages in Ukraine. Surzhyk's systemic character or independence is also indicated in research by the fact that there are speakers in Ukraine who were first socialized with Surzhyk and for whom Surzhyk is, therefore, their mother tongue. Some speakers of Surzhyk are often not even aware that they speak Surzhyk. Researchers agree, however, that Surzhyk deviates from the norms of the two standard languages, Ukrainian and Russian, that form it, although these deviations are evaluated differently. The different evaluations of the deviations are connected, among other things, to the fact that the two standard languages of Ukraine also influence each other through permanent contact, leading to deviations on different linguistic levels and making the discussion about norms in each more complex. A sociolinguistic classification of Surzhyk is made difficult by the lack of consensus on how broadly or narrowly Surzhyk should be understood as a mixture of languages and whether it is then even permissible to speak of Surzhyk in the singular. Some relevant studies, therefore, point to the need to distinguish several types or regional variants of Surzhyk, considering both purely linguistic and extralinguistic factors.

A German-Austrian group of researchers led by Tilmann Reuther and Gerd Hentschel made the most recent promising proposal to distinguish between two types of Surzhyk: Old Surzhyk and Neo-Surzhyk. This distinction reflects the history of Ukraine because Old Surzhyk originates from the time when Russian linguistically dominated the territory of today's Ukraine (which it did, with a short interruption during the early period of the Soviet Union from approximately 1860 until the Union's dissolution). Ukrainian speakers adapted to the Russian-speaking environment, which resulted in the form of Surzhyk—a Ukrainian-based one—that was also passed on to the next generations. Thus, it is Old Surzhyk that has been elevated to the status of a research object in numerous studies. On the other hand, Neo-Surzhyk is connected to the history of independent Ukraine and especially its language policy. As the researchers claim, Neo-Surzhyk is a mixed language spoken by those who primarily use Russian in everyday

life but have switched to Ukrainian as their main language due to language policy measures and language purist ideology (see Volodymyr Kulyk's analysis in this issue). As a result, their language is currently a kind of interlanguage with a Russian base or a higher proportion of Russian vocabulary. Against the current linguistic-political background, Neo-Surzhyk may be viewed even more negatively than the familiar Old Surzhyk by the Ukrainian population, as Neo-Surzhyk can function as a shibboleth, that is, as a characteristic feature that enables a precise social classification of speakers. With the rather Ukrainian-based Old Surzhyk, this shibboleth function would not be possible to the same extent.

Hybrid Language Practice in Everyday Life

Ukraine's previous linguistic situation was unique in that so-called dialogical bilingualism or semicomcommunication was practised in everyday life, at work, on television or even in parliament: each communicator spoke the language or language code that was easier for him or her, and he or she was still understood. This alternating use of language codes or this hybrid language practice hardly bothered the Ukrainian population. The use of Surzhyk also fell under and still belongs to this hybrid language practice, whereby Surzhyk appears as a compromise language. In this sense, a compromise language assumes a mediating role between the standard languages. Moreover, Surzhyk has great identification potential among a considerable part of the Ukrainian population. However, its use only occurs during certain informal communication situations, so it can be assumed that the context determines the choice of the three possible language codes. The discourse surrounding Surzhyk also exposes a discrepancy in the state-run sociological surveys in Ukraine regarding quotidian language use, in which Surzhyk rarely appears as an option. In contrast, it certainly does in scientific projects and surveys. This means that state institutions do not accept the existence of Surzhyk.

Changes after 2022

Since the Russian invasion in February 2022, a readjustment of linguistic relations in Ukraine has been taking place. The Ukrainian population is changing both language practices and attitudes towards their languages, especially towards the state language, Ukrainian, and the aggressor language, Russian. Ukrainian is supported not only by the state as the leading actor in language policy but also by the people themselves who actively use the language in all social domains so that harmonization between top-down and bottom-up language policy can be observed. Especially in the eastern and southern regions, there is a shift towards Ukrainian. Given these developments, the prognosis for Surzhyk is good, espe-

cially among those parts of the Ukrainian population who previously predominantly used Russian in everyday life. It is precisely this mixed idiom that will be able to

form a (significantly shorter) bridge to transition from Russian to Ukrainian—and Surzhyk does not, as was previously claimed, accelerate the transition to Russian.

About the Author

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