

*Paper Presented at the 2019 ASN World Convention, Columbia University 2-4 May 2019. Any feedback is welcome.  
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**The reordering of language ideologies and language identities in volunteer communities  
amidst the Donbas war, Ukraine**

Language ideologies – sets of beliefs and attitudes connecting linguistic differences to differentiated social status – are fluid and contingent on the social and political environment. War and war-driven shifts in national identification in linguistically diverse societies tend to reshape language ideologies that influence the perceptions who counts as a legitimate member of “nation”. The present study explores the reordering of language ideologies and sociolinguistic practices in Ukraine amidst the Donbas war. Examining the impact of war on language attitudes and use of Russophone civilian volunteers assisting the Ukrainian military and internally displaced persons, the study

Intergroup sentiments have been shown to be an important determinant of social stability in multinational countries. The present study explores the present state of linguistic intergroup tensions in Canada to contribute to the understanding of outgroup attitudes among minorities and majorities. Four main findings are derived from the results of empirical analyses on survey data. (1) Cultural threat impacts outgroup attitudes in both the national minority and the national majority. (2) Education has a strong impact on feelings towards the linguistic outgroup. (3) Unexpectedly, age does not display a statistical influence on intergroup attitudes. (4) Specifically relating to Canada, intergroup feelings between Francophones and Anglophones have over the last quarter century become considerably more positive, both groups hold quite positive attitudes towards one another.

In Ukraine, language is an important facet of national identity. The use of language as a pretext for Russia's aggression towards Ukraine and increased identification with Ukraine amidst war disturbed the well-established language hierarchies. Many individuals altered their attitudes towards the Ukrainian and Russian languages and, to a lesser degree, changed their linguistic practices. This article examines the shifts in language sensibilities and sensitivities in pro-Ukraine volunteer communities, linking them to the discourses about national belonging and state loyalty. More broadly, it addresses the reordering of language identities in linguistically diverse societies amidst war and war engagement.

To contextualize the shifts in language ideologies, the article provides historical background of language politics in Ukraine, pointing to pre-war language ideologies and their meanings. It then turns to an analysis of changes that occurred because of war, presenting three main findings. First, it detects the emergence of narratives that decouple language, patriotism and national belonging. It shows that war engagement made it possible to construct patriotism and loyalty to the country in relation to actions supporting it, reducing the importance of language as a marker of national identity. One effect of the language/loyalty decoupling is the authentication of Russian speakers as legitimate members of the Ukrainian nation. At the same time, however, war provided an opportunity for some to position Russian as a "language of the enemy" and frame the use of Russian as a security threat to Ukraine's statehood, thereby securitizing language use. Contesting discourses on language use indicate that no social consensus about language has been achieved yet. Second, the article demonstrates that despite persisting ideological disagreements persisting, some tangible change has taken place. This pertains to increased cultural, symbolic and emotive identification with the Ukrainian language among Russophone volunteers. I contend war

mobility and socializing played a key role in enabling attitudinal and sociolinguistic change as it presented volunteers with a new linguistic landscape essential for the reordering of language identities. Lastly, the article concludes by demonstrating that increased social openness to Ukraine did not automatically translate into changes in sociolinguistic practices, but some volunteers switched to Ukrainian or became more accommodating to Ukrainophones in bilingual interactions.

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2015 in three cities near the frontlines, Kharkiv, Odesa and Dnipropetrovs'k. I interviewed 95 civilians who voluntarily got engaged in assisting the Ukrainian military and internally displaced persons. Among other things, interviewees were asked about their views on national and language belonging prior to war, invited to comment on the ways their views changed amidst war-driven volunteer engagement and elaborate on the reasons behind the change. I also conducted participation observation of volunteer networks to investigate the context of communication and interaction. As Blommaert and Rampton (2012) note, the meaning of language ideologies and communication “takes shape within specific places, activities, social relations, interactional histories, textual trajectories, institutional regimes and cultural ideologies produced and constructed by embodied agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically” (2012: 20). As such, participant observation and ethnographic tools of inquiry provide a powerful tool to study both language ideologies and sociolinguistic practices. Pinpointing continuities and discontinuities in communicative practices of civilian volunteers and the social spaces within which they occur or are enacted presents an opportunity to understand shifts in language ideologies and to explain how the sites of volunteering and war mobility enable change.

## **Historical background of language politics in Ukraine**

The historical context of language politics in Ukraine can be traced back to late imperial Russia. The imperial state administration envisioned its western region (including Ukraine) and its people as “primordially Russian,” not belonging to separate nationalities, but part of an “all-Russian” national identity (Dolbilov 2004). In line with this thinking, the Ukrainian language, known as “Little Russian,” was not recognized as a separate language with the imperial government claiming that Ukrainian was “nothing, but Russian corrupted by the Polish influence” (Miller 2000 quoted in Remy 2007: 7). Fears of the Ukrainian anti-Russian movement played a key role in the treatment of Ukrainian. It was heavily censored and banned for education and publishing in the late 18th century. Language restrictions went hand in hand with attempts to spread the use of Russian among Ukrainians. As Laitin (1998) states, these attempts had some success. By the 1917 revolution, most of the titular elites in the Russian empire were bilingual and had integrated Russian into their linguistic repertoires.

The regulation of languages in the Soviet era was part of the consolidation of Soviet power (Martin 2001; Bilaniuk 2005). Soviet policies on language can be divided into two distinct periods. During the 1920s and early 1930s, the policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenisation) encouraged the usage of “national languages” with the aim of creating an anti-imperialist multinational state. The main goals of the Soviet-initiated *korenizatsiia* policies were to counteract the legacy of Russian imperialism and, more importantly, to elicit the support of titular nationals in establishing Soviet rule. The main assumption was that minority groups would be more accepting of the new Soviet regime if they functioned in their own language (Pavlenko 2008). As Martin (2001) explains, *korenizatsiia* had three components: the formation of national governing elites, the promotion of the national culture and the use of the national language. In Ukraine, educated titular nationals were allowed to form the core party leadership and occupy positions in the culture sphere.

Ukrainian language became the language of instruction at schools for children, whose “native language” was Ukrainian. This included Russified Ukrainians who were required to send their children to Ukrainian language schools. Forced subscriptions to Ukrainian newspapers, mandatory Ukrainian language signs, and the development of theaters and cultural institutions in the native language were among the policies designated to promote the use of Ukrainian (Crisp 1990; Martin 2001). Two notable exceptions were that, first, the state did not push for the predominant use of Ukrainian in state/party organs, and second, the children of workers did not have to study in Ukrainian (Martin 2001). During this phase, the absolute equality of all languages in a multinational state was stressed and the privileged role of Russian rejected (Crisp 1990).

The policy of indigenisation with its promotion of national languages was envisioned as a temporary measure. It was expected that, over time, a socialist society would overcome ethnic divisions and titular languages would be phased out, forging the way for a single world language as a superstructure (Martin 2001). In Ukraine, the language indigenisation policy resulted in a dramatic increase in the use of Ukrainian in public domains and urban centers, spaces where Russian had hitherto dominated (*ibid.*). At the same time, Martin claims, the language planning policies of this period cannot be seen as successful because they produced a merely bilingual Russian/Ukrainian culture (Martin 2001: 122-3 quoted in Yekelchuk 2004). Moreover, the policies had the opposite effect to what the Soviet elites had envisioned; instead of mitigating interethnic conflict, they firmly entrenched ethnic identification and reified its boundaries (Pavlenko 2008).

In the early 1930s, the policy of indigenisation was revised and reversed. Martin (2001) indicates three reasons that led to this outcome. First, the Soviet elites came to see these policies as a threat to the unity and cohesion of the Soviet state. Second, *korenizatsiia* caused resentment among the Russians residing in Ukraine, raising questions about their status and culture. Third,

and most importantly, Soviet elites believed the korenizatziia policies exacerbated resistance to collectivization in non-Russian regions, since resistance was especially fierce in the non-Russian periphery. A December 1932 Politburo Decree unofficially signified the end of Ukrainization and the beginning of a wave of terror in Ukraine against “bourgeois nationalists” that were seen as the main obstacle to Soviet rule (Martin 2001).

During this time, the advancement of Russian superseded indigenisation, with Russian seen as an instrument that could eradicate the threat of ethnic empowerment and serve as a means of inter-ethnic communication. By and large, Russian was seen as a vehicle of state consolidation and a cure against nationalist sentiments. As Pavlenko (2008) notes, russification in the 1930s comprised two pillars: status and acquisition planning for Russian language and corpus planning for titular languages. Acquisition planning was aimed at increasing the number of Russian speakers. To that end, Russian was promoted in various ways, including its forceful institutional advancement and the Russification of the educational system. The latter was achieved through increased hours dedicated to Russian and a centralized curriculum at schools. After 1938, the study of Russian became obligatory, starting in the second grade (Bilaniuk and Melnyk 2008). Titular languages continued to be used in some domains, particularly in the arts, the press and education, until 1938 (Pavlenko 2008), but their status became less prestigious in urban areas and their knowledge less useful (Kulyk 2011b). By and large, Ukrainian became limited to domains of culture and folklore, while the state functioned mostly in Russian (Arel 2017). In terms of corpus planning, the Soviets employed linguistic interference, in which the orthography, morphology and grammar of titular languages, including Ukrainian, were altered to make them resemble Russian (Bilaniuk 2005). The terminological work was conducted in a way to promote Russian, which became the main source of neologisms related to socialism and Soviet philosophy (Riabchenko 2018).

In the 1950s, changes in educational policy further disadvantaged Ukrainian. A new law stipulated that the language of instruction at schools should be based on parental choice, not the nationality of children (Bilinsky 1964). With Russian seen as a language of social and professional mobility and enjoying higher status, most parents in urban areas outside of Western Ukraine opted for their children to be schooled in Russian (Kulyk 2011b). By 1987 in Kyiv, less than a quarter (70,000 out of 300,000) of all schoolchildren were taught in Ukrainian (Masenko 2004 quoted in Bilaniuk and Melnyk 2008: 349). Arel (2017) notes that in the 1980s, the number of students attending Ukrainian-language schools in Ukraine plummeted to its lowest since the creation of the Soviet Union – close to 50 percent. Most were in small towns and villages, while Russian was prevalent in big cities, except for Western Ukraine.

Kulyk (2011b) notes that the shift to Russian created a discrepancy between communicative practices and identification with particular languages in most Soviet republics. In Ukraine, for example, many Russian speakers retained their ethno-linguistic identity, identifying as Ukrainians and seeing Ukrainian as their “native language.” This was the case even though they no longer used it for everyday communication or defined it as the language of their upbringing. In large part, this was because public discourses supporting the existence of separate nations remained intact. In these discourses, language was perceived as a major attribute of “the nation” and a crucial means of self-determination. This attachment to the Ukrainian language also carried emotional weight, with some Russian speakers seeing it as “the language closer to their soul” (Kulyk, 2011b: 635). Therefore, Soviet rule generated a wide gap between the language use and ethnocultural identity in Ukraine, with individuals identifying as Ukrainians in terms of ethnicity and language, but speaking Russian as the language of communication (Kulyk 2013).

The glasnost' period and the following dissolution of the Soviet Union brought the language question to the fore of Ukraine's political life. In 1989, Ukraine stepped onto the path of de-Sovietization, passing a language law that declared Ukrainian the sole state language. The law aimed to address its precarious situation during the Soviet era by promoting its use in Ukraine's public sphere. The primary goal was to enhance the status of the Ukrainian language and make it more prestigious in Ukraine. On a symbolic level, the decision signaled that Ukrainian would be required for public administration positions (Arel 2017), which asserted the importance of Ukrainian at the state level. Practically, it made Ukrainian the language of written documentation within and between regional and state authorities (except in Crimea) and proclaimed Ukrainian as the language of primary and secondary education in Ukraine. The latter was generally accepted by Russian speakers because it drew on the "native language" principle in schooling and education institutionalized by the Soviet Union, whereby Russian speakers saw Ukrainian as their native language even though they no longer used it for communication (Hrycak 2006).

Russian, in turn, was demoted to the status of a national minority language and guaranteed protection along with other national minority languages of Ukraine. This was seen as controversial by the opponents of the law; they claimed Russian should be given a special status based on its function as a language of inter-ethnic communication in Ukraine, the status given to Russian during Soviet times (Arel 2017). The high number of Russian speakers in Ukraine was also seen as an argument against equating Russian with a national minority language. Despite some tensions, Csernicskó and Ferenc (2016) contend that the 1989 language policies can be interpreted as a compromise, elevating the status of Ukrainian while preserving the dominant position of Russian in the public life of predominantly Russian-speaking cities.



Language politics became increasingly contentious after Ukraine's independence. As Ukraine claimed its right to a separate existence in 1991, its titular language came to be envisioned as an important legitimizer of independence. Some nationalists saw the promotion of the Ukrainian language as a main nation-building goal; among other things, it would revitalize the Ukrainian nation and address historical injustices of suppression and subjugation. They questioned the loyalty and patriotism of Russian speaking Ukrainians, seeing them as "infected" with Russian mentality and "traitors" of Ukraine (Shulman 1998: 619). There was little recognition of the fact that most Russian speaking Ukrainians also identified with Ukraine. Not surprisingly, Russian speaking Ukrainians resisted this categorization, often emphasizing their "biculturalism" – compatible identifications with both Ukrainian and Russian culture. This position was criticized, in turn, by Ukrainian nationalists who saw "biculturalism" and "bilingualism" as a way to legitimize the dominance of the Russian language and culture on Ukrainian lands (Bilaniuk 2005).

The 2004-2006 period signified a visible shift in language policies, with some terming it a period of powerful Ukrainization (Csernicskó and Ferenc 2016). After the Orange Revolution, stricter implementation of language regulations were pursued, with the aim of strengthening the position of the Ukrainian language in education, administration, culture, and economy (ibid). The justification given by the ruling elites touched on the question of historical justice. The positive discrimination of Ukrainian was justified by its long persecution throughout history. In the framing of the language situation in Ukraine, the existing bilingualism was seen as a sign of "malaise" and as requiring correction. As Csernicskó and Ferenc (2016) state, the ambition of the political elites was to create a monolingual state and address the disjuncture between the de jure monolingualism in Ukraine and de facto linguistic diversity.

These policies and their stricter implementation helped the Ukrainian language make gains in terms of status and use. The latter was especially noticeable in government and education. The share of Ukrainian language schools and pre-schools increased steadily after Ukraine's independence, reaching 82 and 86 percent of children in the academic year 2010-2011 (Kulyk 2013:284). The dominance of the Ukrainian language in higher education was even more pronounced, reaching over 90 percent of students. Regional differences, however, persisted in the advancement of Ukrainian. Western and central regions asserted the primacy of Ukrainian in education faster than southern and eastern ones. While 99 percent of pupils were instructed in Ukrainian in L'viv and Luts'k and 96 percent in Kyiv, in Odesa (south Ukraine) 65 percent were schooled in Ukrainian, on Donbas 29 percent and in Crimea only 5 percent (Kulyk 2013). In addition, the use of Ukrainian in southern and eastern regions was often limited to lessons, with informal communication conducted in Russian (Arel 2017). Regional unevenness and linguistic hybridity were also factors of Ukraine's public administration section with a wide discrepancy between spoken and written usage of Ukrainian in eastern and southern regions with Russian remaining the spoken language in public offices (Kulyk 2013). In addition, a number of high ranking officials in the government exclusively relied on Russian, undercutting the status of Ukrainian as the sole state language.

Language legislation was for the first time formally amended in 2012, under the presidency of Victor Yanukovich. He supported a status upgrade for the Russian language during his election campaign, and his subsequent presidency featured resumed attempts to revert to the use of Russian in sectors where Ukrainian had made progress (Kulyk 2013). These attempts culminated in the adoption of legislation that "granted Russian a 'regional' status on half of Ukraine's territory and legalized its use in many domains all over the country" (Kulyk 2013: 284). It also granted parents,

under certain conditions, the right to request authorities to open classes in a language of instruction different from the language of the school (Arel 2017). The law also disturbed the status quo between Russian and Ukrainian languages, challenging the status of Ukrainian as the sole state language in some regions of Ukraine. It was perceived by many in Ukraine as jeopardizing the use of Ukrainian, causing social and political contestation (Kulyk 2013).

Language cleavages resurfaced in Ukraine during and post Maidan. Two distinctive developments should be mentioned in this context. The first pertains to a parliamentary resolution to repeal the 2012 law that expanded the use of Russian the day after President Yanukovich fled Ukraine. While the resolution was subsequently vetoed by interim President Oleksandr Turchynov, the parliamentary move to abolish the law was politically and symbolically untimely (Arel 2017). It added to the political instability in Ukraine and alienated eastern regions. The second development follows from the first and concerns Russia's reaction to the repeal. Russian state officials framed it in radical terms, claiming that the Maidan government was seeking to "ban" Russian and that ethnic Russians and Russian speaking civilians in Ukraine should be physically protected from political violence and tyranny unfolding in Ukraine (Kersten 2014). Russian President Vladimir Putin invoked Article 61 of the Russian Constitution, whereby "the Russian Federation shall guarantee its citizens protection and patronage abroad," and the internationally recognized "Responsibility to Protect" norm as legal and moral justifications to intervene and defend compatriots (*sootechestvenniki*) in Ukraine (Wanner 2014: 428; Kersten 2014).<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Russia's Compatriot policy has been used as a frame to interact with ethnic Russians and Russian speakers abroad after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was strengthened under Putin's Presidency to wield power and engage Russian speaking societies. Knott conceptualizes it as ethnocitizenship; the policy does not grant compatriots equal legal status or rights as Russian citizens, but "offers a form of quasi-citizenship for non-resident kin communities" (2017: 18). It promotes inclusion in terms of the rights, benefits and status of external non-resident ethnicized communities. In effect, it presupposes a status of membership and belonging to ethnic Russians and Russian speakers across post-Soviet spaces in Russia's sphere of influence.

application of the Compatriot policy to Ukraine equated Russian speaking populations with loyalties to Russia, imposing a fixed identity on Russian speakers. By disingenuously claiming Russian speakers were persecuted in Ukraine, Putin legitimized the annexation of Crimea and prompted action for the “protection” of Russophone residents of Donbas. In the months following the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war, the language issue was used as a means to legitimate protests and rebellion.

Since the outbreak of war on Donbas, there has been no political consensus on the language issue in Ukraine (Csernicskó and Máté 2017; Arel 2017). As Csernicskó and Máté remark, after the Maidan protests, Ukraine’s President and Prime Minister both made gestures towards Russian speaking citizens of Ukraine to ease tensions and reduce the threat to national unity. They pointed out that the attempt to abolish the 2012 language law was mistaken and a more tolerant language policy should be designed to unite the country. A new balanced Language Act was supposed to be developed, taking into account the regional, ethnic and national minority diversity of Ukraine, but has not yet materialized (Csernicskó and Máté 2017: 6). The war has reignited disputes around language politics the language issue remained to be politically charged.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, the re-politicization of language in post Maidan Ukraine and its use as a pretext for Russia’s aggression destabilized existing language ideologies at the grassroots level. Changes were visible in volunteer communities, with my respondents talking excessively about the language situation in Ukraine and sharing their opinions about proper language policies and discussing their language preferences. Many reported an increased symbolic, emotive and national

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<sup>2</sup> More recently, steps have been taken to strengthen the position of the Ukrainian language. A new education law adopted in 2017 stipulates that all secondary education will be taught in Ukrainian. The law substantively reduces instruction in national minority languages (including Russian) and limits them to special lessons only (Sasse 2017). This law followed one signed in June 2017, increasing the mandatory share of Ukrainian language content on national and regional television.

identification with Ukrainian. Attitudinal changes, however, were not homogeneous, and volunteers had different opinions about the use and value of Russian and Ukrainian. Next section examines these ideological and communicative shifts, looking first at the linguistic profile of volunteers and language ideologies they espoused before the war. It then examines the shifts in volunteers' language ideologies and sociolinguistic practices, noting ruptures that occurred amidst war and continuities that persist in its aftermath.

### **Language ideologies and language use in volunteer communities prior to war**

The linguistic profile of my respondents showed the predominance of Russian speakers in volunteer networks, an unsurprising finding given the prevalence of the Russian language in eastern and southern Ukraine. About three quarters of 95 interviews were conducted in Russian. In this group, about 20 volunteers reported having a good command of Ukrainian, but said they relied on Russian for everyday communication. One quarter of the interviews (over 20) were conducted in Ukrainian with respondents noting that they felt equally comfortable speaking Ukrainian or Russian. Outside the interviews, however, these respondents reported predominantly using Russian. Only five respondents out of 95 said they exclusively used Ukrainian as their everyday language before the Maidan protests.

Ukrainophone volunteers testified to the difficulty of speaking Ukrainian in a Russophone environment. One of my respondents said her language struggles dated back to 1976 when she, a rural Ukrainophone resident, got her first job in Kharkiv. She reported having to assume a different language identity to keep her employment: "Every day, I'd leave home as a Ukrainian speaker and enter the factory as a Russian speaker. It wasn't even an option to speak Ukrainian with my superiors and colleagues. I was becoming a Russian speaker". Another respondent, a Dnipropetrovs'k born volunteer, talked about the frequent questioning he encountered in public

with many assuming that he comes from “somewhere else” based on the fact that he spoke Ukrainian, nor Russian. He emphasized that speaking Ukrainian was seen a marker of “foreignness” to the city with Ukrainian speakers often feeling alienated and excessively scrutinized. This respondent also noted that he switched to Ukrainian in adulthood, treating it as a personal challenge. He realized the importance of the language switch only afterwards, noting that it reshaped his attitudes to language and national identity in a way he did not anticipate. During childhood, he had been discouraged from using Ukrainian because of its low status and contact mocking that he encountered from Russophone children.

Echoing the stories of Ukrainian speakers about being teased and their identities being questioned, many of my respondents talked about the low status attributed to Ukrainian when discussing their choice of language prior to the war. While Ukrainian made some gains in Russian speaking regions of Ukraine after independence and its status generally became elevated, many residents still perceived it as having less prestige than Russian. Ukrainian was associated with low levels of education, the peasantry and a rural lifestyle. Russian, in contrast, was associated with an urban lifestyle and culture (Bilaniuk 2005). Many of my respondents held these views before the Maidan protests and the outbreak of war. As a volunteer from Kharkiv remarked: “I was born in the Soviet Union, I used to go to a Russian school, learned Russian there. I never learned Ukrainian. I was told that only village dwellers (seliuky) speak Ukrainian. Everyone else speaks Russian. I finished my education and got two university degrees in Russian. The books I read were in Russian.” Sentiments in other regions were identical: “Who was speaking “the language (yazyk)”? Only rural residents, along with those from western Ukraine. In southern Ukraine, nobody! If you hear someone speaking Ukrainian here, you associate them with the village, always!” commented a volunteer from Odesa. Some respondents said Ukrainian was perceived as

“a scum language,” “a cattle language” (teliyachy yazyk) or a “khokhol language”, creating an environment where they were discouraged from learning and speaking it. As language has social utility, it indexes a person’s identity, social status and relation with others (Blommaert 2005; Irvine and Gal 2009). By stating their attitudes about language, my respondents articulated the language ideologies they espoused before the war. As these statements reveal, the language ideologies primarily disadvantaged Ukrainian speakers who would be ascribed the status of villagers or associated with lower levels of education based on their language use.

The outbreak of war and the instrumentalized use of Russian language disturbed existing language ideologies and, to a lesser extent, caused ruptures in sociolinguistic practices among my respondents. Putin’s conception of Russian speakers as “ontologically loyal to Russia” (Arel 2017: 3) and his rhetoric about the “protection” of Russian speakers in Ukraine elicited strong resentment among the Russophone volunteers I interviewed. Many talked about the absurdity of claims that Russian speakers were under threat in Ukraine and noted they never experienced discrimination based on language use. In fact, many agreed that Ukrainian, not Russian, has been disadvantaged in their region. The assertion that Russian speakers are oppressed or “forbidden” to speak Russian drew attention to the political use of language. There seemed to be a consensus that the language question was used instrumentally as a pretext for Crimea’s annexation. As a result, some of my respondents adamantly resisted these discourses, revisited their attitudes towards Russian and Ukrainian and changed their sociolinguistic practices to a certain degree.

These changes disturbed existing language ideologies in Ukraine and generated new discourses on language and nationality in relation to the war. The most notable pertain to the positioning of Russian as the language of the enemy, the securitization of language as an issue directly related to the state’s security and the authentication of Russian speakers as legitimate

members of the Ukrainian nation in view of their war engagement. I discuss these new discourses in more detail noting how they are linked to the conceptualization of nation and the articulation of state allegiance. I show the contradictory impact of war on the language identities of volunteers and the affects it had on their sense of language belonging.

### **Shifting language ideologies in volunteer communities**

A relatively small percentage, six volunteers out of 95, switched from Russian to Ukrainian as the main language of communication during and after the Maidan protests. Two explained their decision to switch to Ukrainian is a way to protest Russia's claims that Russian speakers embrace Russian culture and belong to the Russian sphere of influence. "They say that if we speak Russian, we are Russians", remarked one of my respondents. "We have to switch to Ukrainian to resist that. This is our language, our culture. Russian is the language of our aggressor and we spread it by speaking it". Along similar lines, another respondent said:

The use of Ukrainian language is on the rise in Kharkiv. We even had a saying here: "Let's switch to Ukrainian so that nobody will come to 'save' us". You know, Putin said that southern and eastern Ukraine had to be 'saved' because we are Russian speakers. He didn't think that there would be such a strong resistance against this. If Ukraine has to be saved, the way to do it is to make Kharkiv Ukrainian.

As the comment suggests, many changes in attitudes to Russian occurred directly in response to Putin's rhetoric about Russian speakers belonging to the Russian cultural sphere (Russkii mir). My respondents wanted to distance themselves from Russia, and language was key in doing so. Some even reconceptualized Russian as "a language of the enemy." The adherents of this view felt that the right thing to do was to abandon speaking Russian altogether, as it was "tainted" by the recent aggression and war. Notably, the language practices of these volunteers shifted simultaneously with language ideologies. Individuals enacting these changes saw the use of language not only as a personal choice, but also as a form of political engagement and resistance.



Changed attitudes towards Russian were also noticeable in the statements of Ukrainophones who switched to Russian in the past, after moving to cities where Russian dominated. They regretted the carelessness with which they transitioned to Russian, stressing that their views on language use were no longer the same. For example, a volunteer who moved to Crimea from western Ukraine in 1991 said that she switched to Russian because “that’s the way things worked there. It was just common sense and I didn’t pay much attention to it, even though I should have. If I moved to Crimea in 1991 having today’s views and experiences, I would have never allowed myself to speak Russian there. I see it differently now.” Similarly, another volunteer, a teacher of Ukrainian in Crimea, wished she had worked even harder cultivating love for the Ukrainian language among her pupils. She said that she too revisited her views on language use, regretting not paying attention to it in the past. These individuals had come to see language use as an expression of a political stance and manifestation of loyalty to the state. They embraced the views linking language use to state loyalty. Here, we can see how language use is politicized “from below” in response to political developments in the country and the outbreak of war.

A minority of volunteers went further, framing the use of Russian in Ukraine as an existential threat to Ukraine’s statehood. Two of them, Ukrainophones from Kharkiv and Odesa, pointed out that the conception of the “Russian world” (Russkii mir) hinges on the centrality of the Russian language. They stressed that those spaces where Russian language dominates in the public sphere are under the threat of invasion by Russia-backed military units. In light of this, they insisted on framing the use of Russian not as a matter of preference, but as a matter of national security. Switching to Ukrainian was seen not as a personal choice, but as a necessity to ensure the survival of the Ukrainian state. They argued that the Ukrainization of Russian speakers would contribute to the informational security of Ukraine and act as a shield from “Russia’s propaganda

machinery.” Particularly, they raised the issue of military intelligence as an area where switching to Ukrainian would act as a deterrent from invasive information gathering by Russian military personnel and improve the security situation in Ukraine.

The trend among some volunteers, then, was to construct a link between language and national security, framing the use of Ukrainian as risk management aimed at reducing the threat of intervention. As scholars of securitization observe, security is never an objective condition; rather, it emerges through particular “speech acts” that elevate the issue above normal political logic (Williams, 2011: 453). In the case of language, as the logic goes, the prevalence of Ukrainian language in public is to be ensured above anything else, because the Ukrainian nation might cease to exist otherwise. This framing directly links language, invasion, and annihilation, amplifying the state of extremity in relation to language. This has important normative implications for the treatment of the Russian speaking population in Ukraine and the conduct of social life more generally. As one of my respondents from Kharkiv concluded, “In our complicated case, we need to make sure that the usage of the Russian language is phased out as fast as possible to get ourselves out the potential threat of “brotherly” protection”.

Those supporting a securitizing framework linked language use and separatist sentiments. In this view, the “true patriots of Ukraine” identify with the Ukrainian language, just as they do with other attributes of Ukrainian statehood, such as the Ukrainian flag and anthem. Those who reject, resist or disrespect the Ukrainian language “are just covert separatists and it makes no sense to seek compromises with people like that”, one of my respondents noted. Interestingly, both volunteers mentioned above who supported the securitization framework acknowledged the high presence of Russophone soldiers and volunteer fighters at the front fighting for Ukraine and noted that most of their social circle is Russian-speaking. Yet they still insisted on a link between self-

identification as Ukrainian and language use. They implicitly referred to Russophones as unintentionally complicit in reproducing Russia's influence, putting them in opposition to the Ukrainian state. While the discourses linking language use with national security are not new in Ukraine, the outbreak of war and Russia's role seemed to have revitalized and strengthened them among some Ukrainians.

While a link between language, security and patriotism was visible, new discourses decoupling language, nationality and state loyalty emerged as well. A few of my respondents separated language belonging and national belonging, stating that the language a person uses does not reflect the way he or she "feels." Rather, national sentiments "come from the heart" and should not be extrapolated from language use. In other words, these respondents stressed that the right national belonging comes from emotionally identifying with the land, with the state and the people, regardless of language practices or preferences. During interviews, this interpretation was predominantly, but not exclusively, advanced by Russian speakers who strengthened their sense of national belonging through war engagement and adopted other attributes of Ukrainian statehood, but found it difficult and sometimes unnecessary to switch to Ukrainian.

The war provided a space to legitimize Russian speakers through their contributions to the war effort. A notable number of volunteers, both Ukrainian and Russian speakers, had come to associate loyalty to the country with actions in support of it. In these narratives, the language a person speaks and a self-defined nationality become less relevant if allegiance to Ukraine is shown through actions. They posited that language was not an indication of patriotism anymore and what mattered was a person's political stance and the willingness to work towards a common future. The proponents of this view referenced their friends of various nationalities who were engaged in wartime volunteering and noted that these actions positioned them as "true Ukrainians." They

stressed that this was especially the case because these actions were aimed at preserving Ukrainian statehood. Discussing the high presence of Russian speakers on the front, two of my interviewees remarked:

If you are ready to die for this country and kill for this country, you are Ukrainian. It makes little sense to measure one's loyalty to the country based on the language one speaks.

The conflict between the Russian and Ukrainian languages became of little meaning to me. To the contrary, I don't support forceful Ukrainization. The majority of soldiers on the frontlines are Russian speakers. They died fighting for Ukraine...

These narratives redefine patriotism and state loyalty through action: "doing", "fighting" and "contributing", not "speaking Ukrainian" or "being ethnically Ukrainian." The intensive engagement of Russian speakers in the volunteer networks and volunteer battalions erased the perception that only Ukrainian speakers were truly loyal to Ukraine, decreasing the salience of language as a signal of patriotism. As a result, the use of Russian became disassociated from cultural and political allegiance to Russia.

One effect of the decoupling of language and national belonging was strengthened resistance to "forced Ukrainization" among some volunteers. The volunteers who espoused this view still saw value in increasing the use of Ukrainian in public life. Their main disagreement was not about the use of Ukrainian per se, which was seen favourably, but the rejection of a link between language and state loyalty. They opposed the idea of the unintentional complicity of Russophones in spreading Russia's influence, voiced by the proponents of a language securitization narrative. They also pointed out that speaking Russian did not mean thinking like a "separatist," de-essentializing language use and disconnecting it from the way one feels or thinks. Instead, they stressed the importance of a "common vision" for Ukraine's future. As one volunteer stated: "The focus should be on our land, our children, our future. These are things that unite us.

There are lots of language radicals right now, but this is something that divides us and can potentially destroy what we have”. The emphasis on a “common vision” provided a unifying discourse for nation-making, positioning Russian and Ukrainian speakers as part of the same nation, with the same goals and undertakings regardless of the language use.

By and large, the decoupling of language and nationality and linking national belonging to the idea of a “common future,” signals the authentication of Russian speakers as legitimate members of Ukrainian nation. As Smith (2001) notes, the key concept of national identity is authenticity, achieved through the construction of a continuity with a nation’s history. Proposing a “common vision” as a uniting symbol for Ukrainians embracing different language identities serves to articulate forward looking continuity claims and directs attention away from language diversity to other aspects of Ukraine’s social and political life. Arguably, the war on Donbas presented an opportunity for Russophone Ukrainians to articulate a new version of the myth of national unity, one revolving around allegiance to the nation and the state through action. Decoupling language and state loyalty has become the new default position from which some are willing to renegotiate language politics in Ukraine. Their contributions to the war effort provide the moral grounds for doing so.

### **Increased cultural, national and symbolic identification with Ukrainian**

As a result of recent upheavals and war, most of my respondents revisited their previous opinion of Ukrainian as of lower value and revised their views about its role and function in Ukraine. These re-evaluations were reinforced by the strengthened national identification that many had experienced since the outbreak of war. Two of my respondents had transitioned to Ukrainian, noting that “the language you speak shapes your ways of thinking.” They saw the language switch as a way of increasing their “national consciousness” and rootedness in Ukrainian

culture. This type of framing indicates a strong link between nationality and language identities, with Ukrainian seen as an important marker of national identification and awareness. It implies that Ukrainian speakers are perceived as more culturally “Ukrainian,” in possession of a greater cultural capital. In such instances, the Ukrainian language is still constructed as a cultural boundary of the nation-making project.

Bernsand (2001) argues that conceiving language as an integral part of national identification is typical among those using an ethnonationalist framework; he explains that “what differentiates the nationalist language ideology from other Ukrainophone strands of thought on language and national identity is the sheer emphasis on Nation and Language as values in themselves, values that are often discussed quite independently from the individual members of the nation and speakers of the language” (2001:17). The Ukrainian nation has been conceptualized through language since the 19th century, and a romanticizing and essentializing link between language and nation became accepted by many as common sense. The Soviet Union institutionalized nationhood and nationality, reinforcing an ethnocultural understanding of nation; its legacy continues to linger in the successor states (Brubaker 1994) and remains to shape the ways some of my respondents conceive of themselves.

The heightened attention to language amidst increased national identification has resulted in some Russophone Ukrainians embracing ethnonationalist views. This is visible in the two cases, cited above, of language switching to “increase national consciousness”. Other Russophone volunteers implicitly embraced this stance when they said they couldn’t consider themselves genuine Ukrainians, since they did not speak Ukrainian. Oksana, one of my respondents puts it this way:

Ethnically, my mother is Ukrainian and my father is Jewish. I am a Russophone, even though I understand Ukrainian well. I always identified with Ukraine. This

is my country! When the pro-Russia and pro-Ukraine split happened, I never questioned what side to support. I can't say that I am a big patriot, though... I can't say... I can't say that I knew Ukrainian (yazyk) perfectly. We only studied it at school, that's it. Odesa is a Russian speaking city. It has always been. That's why *I can't say that I am a genuine Ukrainian and that I speak exclusively Ukrainian* (emphasis added). It's not true.

Remarkably, Oksana did not feel she was a genuine Ukrainian, even though she, her parents and grandparents were born in Odesa. Since the nationalist language ideology puts language associated with the nation at the heart of national belonging, it positions Russian speakers as lacking national authenticity. To a degree, Oksana internalized the ethnonationalist views on language, feeling somewhat alienated and uprooted culturally. At the same time, she did not consider it necessary to invest effort in aligning her national and language identities, at least not at the time of the interview. New discourses of decoupling language and nationality absolved her from thinking of a language switch and allowed her to emphasize “love for the country” instead. Put otherwise, the need to switch to Ukrainian was tempered by the emerging discourses of state loyalty through action.

Iterations of discourses on “cultural uprootedness,” however, did play a role in the ways Russophone volunteers thought about their language belonging. One indicated her intention to switch to Ukrainian in the future to nourish her attachment to Ukraine, suggesting that Soviet policies had weakened it:

I speak Russian right now, but if someone addresses me in Ukrainian, I switch. I've decided for myself that eventually I will switch to Ukrainian. For so many years, we have been uprooted from our lands, we lived in rented apartments, had temporary registration. We all became people with ‘propyska’. As a result, people don't feel attached to this land. *We need to engrain it at the very primal level* (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> Only then we can layer on cosmopolitan views, freedoms and so on. Building a nation is the first step towards it.

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<sup>3</sup> Propyska' refers to the restrictive residence permit system institutionalized in the Soviet Union to restrict migration in the Union's most livable regions and keep track of its citizens more generally (Rubins 1998).

Notably, this respondent claimed that attachment to Ukraine should be engrained into members of the nation at the very primal level. She saw language as key in engineering the connection between land, nation and individuals. As Bernsand (2001) notes, this is exactly how language ideologies work to produce identity narratives – by relating language forms to community and nation. While an ethnonationalist ideology has been present in Ukraine for a long time, the testimonies of some volunteers suggest that the war caused it to resonate among Russophone Ukrainians to a stronger degree.

Along with increased cultural identification with Ukrainian, a crystallized allegiance to the Ukrainian state reaffirmed the symbolic importance of the Ukrainian language among volunteers. My respondents unilaterally stated that Ukrainian should remain the sole state language. Many expressed the opinion that everyone who lives in Ukraine should be obliged to learn Ukrainian over time, even if they do not use it for everyday communication, because “it’s the state language.” Noting an elevated social status of Ukrainian in the regions where Russian dominates, one of the volunteers commented:

There is a newly emerged respect for the Ukrainian language among those who don’t speak it. They don’t devalue it anymore. There is a clear understanding now that the Ukrainian language is an attribute of Ukrainian statehood, even if Russian is used for everyday communication. The Ukrainian language has become fashionable, it’s trendy! And that’s great! Before, the Ukrainian language in Kharkiv was seen as idiocy, but it’s really changing.

In light of increased openness to Ukrainian, a few of my respondents noted that the language issue lost its political appeal and became less relevant in Ukraine. Two of them remarked that they switched back to Russian noting that Ukrainian was no longer on the verge of extinction in their cities of residence (Odesa and Dnipropetrovs’k). As these examples illustrate, increased social embrace of Ukrainian has marginally led some to switch back to Russian or treat the language use more lightly, easily transitioning between the two languages.



The symbolic importance of Ukrainian was also expressed through opposition to the idea of re-establishing the status of Russian as a regional language. Many of my respondents found it unnecessary or unacceptable altogether. Some said it would further undermine the status of Ukrainian in regions where Russian dominates, making it disappear altogether. Others argued that Russian should retain the status of a national minority language, like other languages spoken in Ukraine, with no special treatment. Only two of my respondents thought there should be a more nuanced approach to the status of Russian. Regionally, they noted, Russian speakers should be allowed to exchange written documents in Russian but communication with national state officials should be conducted in Ukrainian. This was seen as particularly important to accommodate the older generation, who were less likely to transition to Ukrainian.

When asked about their intent to switch to Ukrainian in the future, a number of Russophone volunteers indicated an intent to do so, but stressed that transitioning to Ukrainian should happen over time, without restrictions on speaking Russian. They noted that transitioning to Ukrainian would require a time and energy commitment that was difficult to combine with the pressures of volunteering. My respondents saw Russian as a language of convenience that allowed them to function and communicate more efficiently. They prioritized their work over their language considerations. In this context, switching to Ukrainian was seen as a long-term commitment that many planned to take on when the war ended. Some said they had already located Ukrainian language training programs and intended to sign up after the war. Others reported incremental changes, like switching to Ukrainian on social media and internet forums or giving preference to reading newspapers and listening to music in Ukrainian.

On a broader scale, two implications of the increased social openness to Ukrainian in volunteer communities should be highlighted. The first is that Russian seems to be losing the

prestige it enjoyed historically, with Russophone volunteers increasingly identifying with Ukrainian culturally and emotionally. This signifies a dramatic shift in language ideologies and language belonging of volunteers. The second implication is that the relationship between increased social openness to Ukrainian and sociolinguistic practices of volunteers is not straightforward. My fieldwork findings suggest that an elevated social openness to Ukrainian did not automatically translate into the use of Ukrainian, but elicited more subtle responses at the sociolinguistic level. Among them, renegotiations of language identities, changed dynamics in non-accommodating bilingualism in Ukraine and a slight de-stigmatisation of language mixing (surzhyk) were most visible, as the next section demonstrates.

### **The role of war mobility and socializing in language renegotiations and use**

The war in Donbas created a new context within which language negotiations and interactions in Ukraine could take place. My findings suggest that many volunteers changed their habitual settings amidst war, made new friends on the front and away, and subsequently altered their language practices. The new environment for social interactions has been favourable to the use of Ukrainian and have allowed Russophone volunteers to increasingly use Ukrainian words or switch to Ukrainian altogether. In some instances, the volunteer sites acted as spaces where Russophone volunteers felt encouraged to practice Ukrainian and use it for everyday interactions outside of volunteering.

As war generated new forms of mobility and inter-regional cooperation, increased inter-regional cooperation and frequent travels to the front influenced the sociolinguistic practices of volunteers. This is because, as Jaworski and Thurlow (2011) observe, language use is affected by different forms of mobility and everyday settings. Travelling has an inevitable effect on the sociolinguistic realities of those “on the move,” allowing people to renegotiate their linguistic

identities through encounters with new places and people. The language accompanying the speaker interacts with new environments and becomes “re-contextualized” and “re-emoticed.” New forms of mobility and sociality have the potential of producing new linguistic landscapes, affecting individuals’ socio-linguistic practices.

In volunteer communities, the effect of war mobility and socializing on language use has been noticeable in the increase comfort of Russophone volunteers to switch to and speak Ukrainian. For example, a female volunteer from Dnipropetrovs’k touring the frontlines with performances referenced her trips to the war zone as a reason for increasingly using Ukrainian. She stated that many combatants at the front were speaking Ukrainian: “Many of them! To my surprise! When I started speaking Ukrainian with them, I realized that I couldn’t stop.” Similarly, Olena, a Kharkiv-born Russophone psychologist indicated an increased usage of Ukrainian because of her volunteer work:

During the last year or so, I have predominantly worked with Ukrainian speaking combatants from the L’viv battalion as a psychologist. I switch languages all the time. I’ve got used to speaking Ukrainian now. To the extent that recently a Russian speaking soldier told me to stick to Ukrainian if it is easier, because I kept inserting Ukrainian words while speaking Russian. When I spend time with a Ukrainian speaking battalion, it feels weird to switch back to Russian.

In both cases, war engagement, not war itself, became facilitated language switching. War mobility presented new opportunities for Russophone volunteers to communicate and build close ties with Ukrainophone combatants. One effect of this was a situational or permanent language switch to Ukrainian with the use of Russian as the language of everyday communication becoming partially or fully displaced. Notably, it is predominantly female respondents who felt an urge to switch to Ukrainian when communicating with Ukrainian speaking combatants. One respondent mentioned that she made an extra effort to switch to Ukrainian when volunteering at the hospital and assisting the Ukrainophone combatants from western regions of Ukraine. As I discovered,

hospital volunteering and other volunteer-related activities created a new context within which language switching was enabled and deemed appropriate.

These snippets are indicative of the gendered dynamics in language use when Ukrainian language becomes “re-emotitized” in wartime interactions with Russophone female volunteers using specific linguistic registers and language in addressing Ukrainophone soldiers. Language switch is one way through which female volunteers express care and accommodate those men who fight on the front and suffer the consequences of war. Given the intensity and frequency of these exchanges, such linguistic accommodation is productive for the reordering of language identities among the volunteers. New structures of feelings and attachment that arise amidst war can play a crucial role in facilitating new socio-linguistic practices among volunteers.

War socialization also intensified the discussions of language in the volunteer milieu, making volunteers and combatants renegotiate their sociolinguistic identities. Natalia, a Russophone volunteer from Dnipropetrovs’k, is a good illustration. Since the outset of war, she had been helping Pravyi Sektor, a volunteer battalion known for its nationalist views. Its rhetoric about a “united” Ukraine and the dominance of Ukrainian language and culture resonated with Natalia’s own vision of Ukraine’s future, but conflicted with her present language practices. Natalia said she frequently insisted that language belonging itself is a poor indicator of national belonging and resisted the jokingly imposed definition of her as “a separatist.” She invested effort into articulating her own position to combatants, claiming that “a common vision” is a better measure of patriotism and “Ukrainianness.” Having established authority and gained respect through volunteering, Natalia advocated for increased language tolerance among those she assisted, at least temporarily. Gendered solidarities underpin these negotiations and have the potential of making combatants more perceptive to the views of female volunteers, who are

credited for unwavering support and care. In the short term, these renegotiations could lead to Russophone volunteers negotiating a higher degree of language tolerance for Russian speakers. In the long term, it might lead to Russophone volunteers embracing the dominant language ideology and encourage them to revise their sociolinguistic practices accordingly. While the exact impact of these negotiations is difficult to estimate, they point to the importance of war milieu in shifting the dynamics of language negotiations in a way that is favorable to Ukrainian.

It is not only interactions with combatants that impact the sociolinguistic identities of volunteers. Some Russophone respondents indicated that their social circles had substantially expanded over the course of volunteering, becoming more diverse linguistically. Many established connections and friendships with those speaking Ukrainian either in their cities of residence or other cities across Ukraine. Some reported using these contacts to improve their competence in Ukrainian and use it as “a push” to switch to Ukrainian more often in daily communication. A few remarked that they “always try to catch someone speaking Ukrainian” to practice and learn from them. Others said they insisted their interlocutors from western regions not switch to Russian when communicating with them, even when communication happened over the phone. As these examples suggest, the dynamics of linguistic accommodation have shifted amidst the war.

Non-accommodating bilingual interactions have been common in Ukraine, with people adhering to their preferred language, especially in public and the media (Bilaniuk and Melnyk 2008). In cases where linguistic accommodation does take place, Ukrainian speakers used to switch to Russian, based on the assumption that Russian, not Ukrainian, was spoken by everyone. Recent developments and war socializing have reversed these dynamics of linguistic non-accommodation, at least among the volunteers. My findings suggest that Russophone volunteers demonstrate a higher degree of willingness to linguistically accommodate Ukrainian speakers, a

reversal of the former trend whereby Ukrainian speakers would accommodatingly switch to Russian. A few of my respondents said they teach their children to respond in the language of their interlocutor, a tendency that implies Russian speakers accommodated Ukrainian interlocutors. As one of my respondents explained, she told her daughter it is “a disgrace” not to do so, living in Ukraine. Some also reported switching to Ukrainian more frequently when addressed in Ukrainian.

In addition, Russophone volunteers insist that their Ukrainian interlocutors not switch to Russian to accommodate them, often because they didn’t see it appropriate:

When I call someone in western Ukraine, Ternopil’ or Ivano-Frankivs’k asking “girls” to help me assemble packages to the front, they immediately switch to Russian. I call them out on this – why are you switching to Russian? If I can’t speak Ukrainian, it doesn’t mean that they need to accommodate me!

Another volunteer made a similar observation about interlocutors from western Ukraine and their readiness to switch to Russian:

They always ask me what language I prefer – Russian or Ukrainian? Because they are ready to accommodate me! I tell you that nobody from the Russian speaking regions would switch to Ukrainian to accommodate me if I were a Ukrainian speaker... Nobody!

Their remarks indicate that some individuals have started paying closer attention to language dynamics. As a result, practices of language accommodation have become more visible, questioned and occasionally adjusted. In many instances, an increased attention to language accommodation led Russophones to see Ukrainian speakers as more tolerant and considerate of their preferences, something that my respondents sought to reciprocate. In a few instances, they insisted their interlocutors not switch to Russian because they wanted to “learn proper Ukrainian from them,” a normatively-loaded framing that indicates the positioning of Ukrainian speakers as speaking a “pure” language.

Changes in non-accommodating bilingualism were equally visible to Ukrainophone volunteers. They all stressed the absence of necessity to linguistically accommodate; as they said, everyone understood Ukrainian, even if it wasn't their primary language. Some even remarked that the linguistic accommodation of Russian speakers was "insulting" and implied a low IQ. "In Kharkiv, there are no people who don't understand Ukrainian," remarked one of my respondents. "People are smart enough here and have the intellectual capacity to understand both languages, even if they don't use both in everyday communication. Linguistically accommodating them is demeaning, really." In this sense, non-accommodating bilingualism in volunteer communities has become more prevalent, with Russian speakers adjusting their practices to accommodate Ukrainian speakers, not the other way around. The burden of bilingualism might have shifted in favour of Ukrainian speakers in the volunteer communities.

If volunteers demonstrate a greater social openness to Ukrainian and a growing willingness to accommodate Ukrainian speakers, what are the main barriers that keep them away from speaking Ukrainian? Why had only six switched to Ukrainian since the outbreak of war? Many of my respondents referenced an anxiety of speaking "bad Ukrainian" or *surzhyk* – a language mix of Ukrainian and Russian as something that prevents them from switching to Ukrainian:

I have always been against surzhyk. If someone switches to Ukrainian here, it's mostly surzhyk. I think that if you want to learn a language, learn it right. At my age it's hard to learn Ukrainian perfectly. For basic communication, I can speak surzhyk, but I don't want to.

I can speak Ukrainian, but my son tells me not to. He says "You speak Ukrainian very badly. Your pronunciation is very harsh. It doesn't sound nice". That's why I don't speak it.

As these statements illustrate, the categorization of language and what constitutes "good" and "bad" Ukrainian featured prominently in my respondents' accounts. Speaking "proper

Ukrainian” was important for the volunteers I interviewed; they did not want to appear “illiterate” by making mistakes in Ukrainian. Some said they expected their interlocutors to also speak “correct” Ukrainian, not distorting the language. Others noted that their friends or relatives shut down their attempts to practice Ukrainian by commenting on its impurity and harshness. A few confided that they considered surzhyk to be their native language since it was the language they spoke with their parents from childhood. Growing up, they came to associate it with “faultiness,” the perception that many others shared.

As Bernsand (2001) reminds us, linguistic variations or language mixing such as surzhyk do not carry any significance or abnormality in themselves. Linguistic transgressions are not “ridiculous” or “illiterate” per se, as many of my respondents indicated. Language ideologies give social meaning to linguistic diversity and structure relations between language varieties and link them to social status, and perceived relations with other people. Given this indexicality, language discussions and problems are emblematic of identity processes and hierarchies. Writing or speaking incorrectly produces “strong indexicalities of abnormality, of non-membership of the ideal member categories defining the language” (Blommaert 2005: 5) and can lead to negative sanctioning. An important quality of language ideologies is that they work through misrecognition, where linguistic forms that do not conform to the dominant language ideologies are seen as a “problem” to be corrected or eliminated (Blommaert and Rampton 2012). The urge to eliminate or “take out” these forms is emblematic of socio-political processes aimed at “correcting” certain types of identities perceived as faulty or socially undesirable.

In Ukraine, a heightened preoccupation with linguistic pureness and correctness should be understood as a response to skepticism about the legitimacy of the Ukrainian language (Bilaniuk 2005). Discussions on which language forms should be accepted as normative in Standard



Ukrainian first arose in the 19th century. These discussions among cultural entrepreneurs were significant, not so much for language standardization, but more profoundly for whether Ukrainian and Russian represent separate languages or different dialect systems of the same all-Russian language (Bernsand 2001: 40). Because two languages came to be conceptualized as separate systems, Ukrainian language activists worked to create a clear-cut boundary between them (ibid). Language mixing was perceived as unacceptable because it blurred the boundary between the two languages and questioned the legitimacy of Ukrainian. Concerns about the correctness of the language were amplified by the “myth of homogeneity” of the nation. In this myth, people are expected to adhere to the same linguistic standards for the sake of national homogeneity and coherence (Bilaniuk 2005). This concern resurfaced in independent Ukraine, with Ukrainian nationalists sometimes condemning language mixing and stressing the importance of “pure” language forms to clearly delineate Ukrainian from Russian (Bernsand 2001).

While ideologically surzhyk was not recognized as a language, it became prevalent in Ukraine because of migration patterns. Language mixing gained sway during the urbanization of the Ukrainian peasantry when Ukrainophone residents increasingly moved to the cities for work. As Russian predominated in the cities and enjoyed a more prestigious status, urbanizing peasants tried to incorporate Russian words into their linguistic registers. As a result, surzhyk came to be associated with villages and a lack of education, conferring a lower social status on its speakers. The socially negative attitude towards surzhyk and increased attention to language correctness made my respondents anxious about speaking “incorrectly” and looking “ridiculous” in their attempts to use Ukrainian. As Kulyk (2011a) notes, the unequal attention to the quality of Ukrainian compared to Russian, constant evaluations of the “adequacy” of Ukrainian and unwillingness to tolerate a Ukrainian of “low quality” preserved a Russian linguistic environment

and reproduced the hegemony of the Russian language in the regions where Russian dominates. Concerns of my respondents over the “purity” and “adequacy” of their Ukrainian seem to have a similar effect, hindering their use of the language.

It should be noted that volunteer networks occasionally became spaces where surzhyk was de-stigmatized and linguistic impurity was redefined as a source of pride, not embarrassment. Three of my respondents said they had developed a greater acceptance of surzhyk because, to them, it suggested a person “attempts to change their ways and switch to Ukrainian.” One even said Russian speaking Ukrainians have to come to terms with speaking surzhyk before they come to speak “pure Ukrainian,” as this is a transitional phase. Narratives like these destigmatized surzhyk and created a level of acceptability for language mixing. Occasionally, volunteer sites provided space where my respondents could speak surzhyk without feeling stigmatized for it. A volunteer network in Kharkiv exemplifies this. One of them said they are trying their best to speak Ukrainian “out of patriotism.” Right away, she apologetically added that “of course, our Ukrainian is funny sounding. It’s language mixing (surzhyk)”. Another volunteer chimed in saying that at the volunteering center, they often switched to Ukrainian while making camouflage nets, adding:

You know, we came to see ourselves as a nation now! Our only chance for survival is coming together as a nation, regardless of the language we speak. The knowledge of Ukrainian language will follow suit. We have already started working on it.

The volunteers of this network, as other respondents I interviewed, had developed an understanding that national identity comes first and the use of Ukrainian language follows suit. Even if declarative, these statements are important indications of how volunteers think of the relations between national and language identities and adjust their socio-linguistic identities based on the new understanding. Some of my respondents felt that their national identity had become

unambiguously established. Language was important, but not definitive. Many indicated an intent to increase the use of Ukrainian in the future.

### **Conclusion**

While language remains a contested issue in Ukraine, war and war engagement have unsettled existing language ideologies and reinvigorated discussions about language use, state loyalty and nation. My respondents reported a heightened symbolic and cultural identification with Ukrainian, which has become to be seen as the language of wartime solidarities and connectedness. At the same time, however, the narratives of my respondents demonstrate significant differences in the ways they relate the Ukrainian language to state and national belonging. Some embraced the idea that language use has no bearing on state's loyalty, pointing to the contribution of Russophone Ukrainians to the war effort. Others had come to see Russian as the language of the enemy and framed its use in Ukraine as a security concern. These competing discourses signify important points of contestation and diverging views of what constitutes "the nation" and who can count as a "genuine" member of it.

My findings suggest that along persisting disagreements about language, a shift towards Ukrainian did occur in volunteer communities. Russian speakers increasingly take note of language dynamics between Russian and Ukrainian speakers, seeking to reciprocate the linguistic accommodation hitherto exhibited by Ukrainian speakers. In addition, changing patterns of linguistic interactions are legitimized in favour of Ukrainian. In this sense, new forms of linguistic (non)accommodation result in Russian speakers embracing the dominant language ideology that posits Ukrainian as the legitimate language of Ukrainians and "the language of Ukraine's future". War mobility and socializing played an important role in enabling these attitudinal and socio-

linguistic changes as it created new landscapes for Ukrainophones and Russophones to interact and these interactions occurred to the advantage of Ukrainian language.

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