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Purism and Pluralism: Language Use Trends in Popular Culture in Ukraine since Independence

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LANGUAGE ISSUES HAVE FREQUENTLY FIGURED at the center of Ukraine's social and political developments. Prevailing language ideologies have ranged from intense purism and politicization of language choice to a more pluralistic acceptance of different language varieties. Contradictory ideologies and practices can coexist at any given point in time, and therefore shifts in language ideology have been layered and complex. Nevertheless, changes in dominant trends are discernable during Ukraine's trajectory as an independent country. In this paper I trace these shifts and their manifestations in popular cultural practices, and examine how language ideologies in Ukraine have been connected to broader political and social issues. A focus on popular culture encompasses institutionally produced and individual forms of expression, in which political, artistic, and economic forces intersect, and it is an arena that allows for broad involvement of people from various social strata. I consider usages and attitudes towards various dimensions of language, including standards, mixing, code-switching, nonstandard dialects, slang, vulgarities, and foreign borrowings. My findings are based on periodic field research in Ukraine since 1991, study of academic publications, print media, broadcast media, and online popular cultural media and social networks. This analysis begins with a summary of the sociolinguistic landscape of Ukraine that I presented in my book *Contested Tongues*¹ and then considers the changes in practices and ideologies of the last decade.

Laws regulating language have played an important role in Ukraine. Setting the groundwork for independence, in 1989 the Ukrainian Soviet

Socialist Republic issued a Law on Languages that declared its titular language, Ukrainian, to be its state language. This law was reinforced by independent Ukraine's Constitution, ratified in 1996. The constitution contains some ambiguity regarding the implementation of language policies, as it also declares support for the use of Russian and other languages. Even so, the status of Ukrainian as the sole state language of Ukraine has stood firm as an emblem of the country's legitimacy since independence. Indeed, people now often refer to the language not by name as "Ukrainian," but rather as *derzhavna* 'the state (language)', emphasizing its legal status over ethnic or cultural associations.

The assertion of the legitimacy and official status of Ukrainian was a rejection of an ideology, pervasive in Russian imperial and Soviet times, that saw Ukrainian as an illegitimate, peasant tongue, not even worthy of the term "language." Russian imperial edicts forbade the public use of the Ukrainian language in regions under its control and even sought to deny its existence. Despite the short-lived policy of indigenization during the early Soviet period in the 1920s, which supported the promotion of Ukrainian, overall the Soviet system led to the increasing marginalization of Ukrainian in favor of the expansion of Russian language use. When Ukraine gained independence in 1991, Russian was the language of power and social advancement, and it was widely used especially in urban areas and in the media. The legal status of Ukrainian as the sole state language provided affirmation of Ukrainian identity and sovereignty, but widespread use of Russian posed a challenge for nation-building that relied primarily on a "one language, one nation" model. A two-language model was problematic because Russia actively sought to exert its influence over Ukraine, in part through language, promoting Russian in Ukraine as part of its strategic interests.

In over two decades of independence, language attitudes and laws have oscillated between promoting Ukrainian and maintaining the bilingual situation in which Russian is dominant in many spheres. While the use of Ukrainian did expand, during the Yanukovich presidency a controversial law designating Russian as a regional official language threatened to undermine the status and increased use of Ukrainian. The threat of Russia's influence was made real in 2014, as Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, and then not so covertly sent troops and arms to support a separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine, a direct breach of Ukraine's borders and sovereignty.

Modes of Agency: Language Choice

I distinguish two main forms of linguistic agency, one focused on language choice, and the other on language correctness. The first, language choice, can mean choosing one language exclusively and favoring a monolingual environment. Alternatively, one can reject a monolingual format in favor of having both languages in the same context, either through codeswitching or bilingual interactions. Regardless of which language is used, an additional set of issues relates to “correctness”: whether the language is a standard or nonstandard dialect, whether it mixes the rules and forms of two standard languages, and whether or not the forms are considered socially appropriate. Both language choice and language correctness have played an important role in ideologies and practices in Ukraine.

During the Soviet era, use of Ukrainian in spheres where Russian prevailed could in itself be taken as rebellion against the Soviet system. When the USSR crumbled, the 1989 Law on Languages, and then the 1996 Constitution, established that Ukrainian is the state language and required it in education and public offices. However, even then the choice of Ukrainian could be taken as provocative, as it disrupted existing social hierarchies in contexts where Russian prevailed. While some people celebrated the elevation of the status of Ukrainian, others did not. The reasons varied. For example, some just did not want their linguistic landscape to change; others bemoaned the loss of undisputed prestige that Russian fluency had once given them and were skeptical about the value of the former “peasant language.” Use of Russian, while generally less marked than Ukrainian language in many urban contexts, also became politicized, as it could be taken to mean a rejection of Ukrainian culture and sovereignty.

The question of language choice, Ukrainian or Russian, was a polarizing issue for many, but at the same time most people in Ukraine were bilingual to some degree due to schooling and exposure to both languages in daily life, so language choice usually did not create a barrier for communication. Consequently, the widespread practice of non-accommodating bilingualism developed, in which each person speaks their preferred language, regardless of the language spoken by their interlocutors. As I have discussed elsewhere,² such interactions were common within families, in public settings, and in broadcast media.

Non-accommodating bilingualism allowed people to avoid the divisive issue of language choice, although the languages were often not balanced in practice. For example, in public concerts and bilingual television programs that I observed in 2009, Russian predominated while Ukrainian had a smaller, subsidiary role.³ Nevertheless, the acceptability of speaking either language facilitated shifts in use and enabled many people to change their established speech habits and make the public switch from Russian to Ukrainian. It allowed people to perform a monolingual identity, if that was their choice, regardless of the language preferences of their interlocutor. Acceptance of non-accommodating bilingualism did not necessarily mean a desire to speak both languages oneself.

As these two linguistic modes of interaction—monolingual accommodation and bilingual non-accommodation—existed side by side, there was always the potential of slippage from one mode to the other. For example, in contexts where both languages were used, antagonism could activate the oppositional symbolism of a particular language, making visible the language choice that was often treated as transparent in non-accommodating interactions. There was also a third mode of interaction, one that did not keep Ukrainian and Russian standard and separate, but where speakers code-switched, mixed, and used nonstandard forms.

The Allure of Nonstandards

This brings us to the second form of linguistic agency, which concerns language correctness. In the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years, in some circles nonstandard language forms symbolized resistance to the regime in power. The most prominent example in popular culture was the Braty Hadiukiny rock band, whose lyrics were mostly in western Ukrainian dialect with some admixture of Russian and slang.⁴ As Eleonora Narvselius argues, such nonstandard local forms carried a “distinct rebellious tinge in opposition not only to Soviet ‘internationalism,’ but also to the absence of regional color in the ‘standard’ Soviet-confined Ukrainian-ness as presented in schools and official discourses.”⁵

The use of nonstandard and mixed Ukrainian-Russian language as protest against the vestiges of Soviet power diminished in the 1990s, as concern for the purity and correctness of Ukrainian became linked

with constructions of Ukrainian independent nationhood. A purist ideology sought to distinguish a legitimate, high-status language from the Ukrainian language varieties that were widely spoken by less educated and rural populations, which often mixed Ukrainian and Russian forms. Such mixed language was known as *surzhyk*. Academic and popular publications of this time tended to be prescriptive, focused on identifying incorrect usages and advocating for what they deemed to be the correct forms.⁶ The underlying ideology saw the need for a proper Ukrainian language to promote proper social development, and some of the prescriptive publications warned of the dangers and cognitive limitations associated with *surzhyk*. There were occasional disagreements over what should be defined as correct, especially when it came to the revival of forms that Soviet policies had banned and removed from usage. However, there was, and continues to be, general agreement among the language mavens regarding the undesirability of Russified forms used in Ukrainian—in other words, the undesirability of *surzhyk*. The effort to eradicate *surzhyk* continues to this day, including through internet sites such as “Mova—DNK natsii” (Language—the DNA of the nation).⁷

Beginning in the 1990s, nonstandard language varieties, especially *surzhyk*, became iconic of cultural lowness and the damage done by Russification. In popular culture, nonstandard forms were relegated to the comedic and derogatory portrayal of less educated, provincial populations. The best exemplar of this trend was Verka Serdutchka, a *surzhyk*-speaking persona performed by cross-dressing actor Andrii Danylko. Serdutchka achieved huge popularity in Ukraine and also Russia, where the image of a crass Sovietized and Russified Ukrainian fit the stereotype of Ukrainians as uncultured and laughable.⁸ Serdutchka’s popularity was controversial, as some Ukrainians felt that this character’s portrayal was shameful and hurtful to Ukraine. Despite the controversy, Danylko-as-Serdutchka’s fame reached a pinnacle when he was chosen to represent Ukraine in the 2007 Eurovision competition and won a respectable second place. Serdutchka could be interpreted as providing a social critique of both Soviet and post-Soviet trends and people, and admired for her audacity and wit, as well as appreciated for portraying the realities of everyday post-Soviet life. But the message that the uncultured Ukrainian masses were laughable often eclipsed more positive or nuanced interpretations.

The television sketch-comedy program *Faina Iukraina* (Файна Юкраїна), which aired from 2008 to 2011, is another example of the use of surzhyk to portray the lower educational and socioeconomic levels of characters. The title of the show is itself nonstandard, and could be conveyed in English as “Mighty-fine Yoo-kraine.” This program centered primarily on the antics of two actors, Serhii Prytula and Andrii Molochnyi, who occasionally cross-dressed as they carried out a wide range of roles. It is notable that the actors used a variety of standard and nonstandard Ukrainian and Russian language expressions in portraying characters. Language choice and standardness were used to indicate particular social positionings and the educational level of characters, but standard language did not always correlate with positive qualities. In this program all social levels and language forms were subject to satirization. Even so, surzhyk in particular was used to convey cultural and intellectual limitations.

Literary works also provide examples of nonstandard language used to express social, intellectual, and moral lowness. Les Poderev’ians’kyi and Bohdan Zholdak both used surzhyk, often laden with vulgarities, to depict the decrepitude of the Soviet-bred mentality of Ukraine’s underclasses. Poderev’ians’kyi became a cult figure for Ukrainian youth,⁹ although literary works had a much more limited audience and impact than the mass-mediated comedy of Serduchka, *Faina Iukraina*, and other televised acts. While there was some variation in the above-mentioned examples of surzhyk use, the overall association of surzhyk with negative social qualities was a constant.

As Ukrainians became more confident in their country’s independence, a new take on surzhyk emerged in the popular mainstream alongside the trends described above. This was a more positive, affectionate use of surzhyk, as a naturalistic portrayal of local linguistic practices, and an embrace of the internal variations in Ukrainian language and culture. This approach was evident in the songs of the rock band T.I.K. (an acronym for *Tverezist’ i Kul’tura* [Sobriety and Culture]), which began performing in 2005 and was headed by singer Viktor Broniuk. While most of T.I.K.’s repertoire was in standard Ukrainian, their occasional use of surzhyk stood out due to its stigmatized nature. A music television commentator even referred to Viktor Broniuk as a “male Verka Serduchka.”¹⁰ Yet T.I.K.’s performances, while often humorous, did not caricature Ukrainian culture in the way Serduchka did, and Broniuk’s

use of surzhyk mostly evoked authenticity and positive affect. Such non-pejorative use of surzhyk was still rare, but it signaled a new trend in the ideology of language. Rather than an exclusive focus on achieving an idealized standard, there was now more acceptance of a broader array of existing Ukrainian linguistic practices.

The naturalistic use of surzhyk in popular music correlated with the emergence of a descriptive approach in academic studies that treated nonstandard language, including surzhyk-like mixtures and obscenities, as objects of scientific inquiry rather than censure. During my fieldwork in 2009, I found young scholars at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy University taking a descriptive approach to language varieties of small urban areas that would have been shunned as “surzhyk” a decade earlier but that were now being referred to as “dialects.” Linguist Lesia Stavyts’ka made a major impact with her books *Ukrainian Jargon* (2003, 2005) and *Ukrainian Language without Taboos* (2008), in which she documented various slang terms and obscenities.¹¹ Her work stirred controversy among those who preferred to view Ukrainian as chaste and lacking in vulgar expressions, but others lauded her work as a long-needed intervention that brought forward a vibrant and necessary part of the living language.¹² Stavyts’ka saw slang dictionaries as something that “every civilized nation” should have.¹³ Others used analysis of obscenities to make an argument for the closeness of Ukraine to Europe, given that Ukrainian and European obscenities supposedly focus on copro-rectal aspects, in contrast to the sexual-genital focus of Russian obscenities.¹⁴ Research also revealed the deep historical roots of a specifically Ukrainian tradition of obscene language.¹⁵

Aside from the descriptive academic approach and the naturalistic use of nonstandard forms in popular culture, the use of surzhyk also expanded in interpersonal interactions. Social networks such as Facebook (founded in 2004) and its Russian counterparts Odnoklassniki (founded in 2006) and Vkontakte (founded in 2007) created a new public arena for textual interactions. It was on Facebook, beginning around 2010, that I began noticing friends and colleagues who were highly educated, and whom I knew to be fluent in both Ukrainian and Russian standards, using surzhyk extensively in their posts. In addition to slang and Ukrainian-Russian hybrid forms, one could also see the practice of writing Russian words according to their phonology, but subverting orthographic standards. In Russia such nonstandard writing

has come to be known as the *Olbanskii* language, or *iazuk podonkov/podonkovskii*—the language of (social) dregs, the language of jerks.¹⁶ For example, standard Russian devoices word-final obstruents and the sonorant *v*; one can play with this factor to render words in an “anti-correct” orthography that may still be pronounced correctly according to Russian phonological rules. Thus the final devoiced *v*’ of *l’ubóv* ‘love’ will sound like an [f’], so the standard spelling of *любовь* can be replaced by *любоф* or *любофф* and still be pronounced more or less correctly with the letter *в* replaced by *ф* or *фф*. Words that end with an unvoiced final obstruent such as final *t* in *pr’iv’et* ‘hello’ may be written with a voiced final consonant, since the devoicing rule would apply, thus *привед* instead of standard *привет*. Likewise the rules of vowel pronunciation allow for play in rendering words in incorrect orthography. For example, the fact that in Russian unstressed *e* is pronounced as [i] leads to the widespread writing of *превед* instead of the correct *привет*. To complicate this further, grammatical rules may also be misapplied. While the original approach was to render a correct pronunciation with as many orthographic mistakes as possible, certain spellings like the suffix *-er* (*-eg*) instead of *-ik* (*-ik*) have become canonical in this anti-correct language, and are used even when their placement is not word-final and so does not result in correct devoiced pronunciation. For example, the plural of *красавчег* (an incorrect spelling of *красавчик* ‘handsome man’ that would still be pronounced [krasafčik]) is often written as *красавчеги*, in which the *г* (*g*) is not word-final, and so would not result in the correct devoiced pronunciation. Technically only the Russian elements can be rendered using orthographic-phonetic mismatches, as standard Ukrainian is spelled phonetically, but the canonical incorrect forms can be adopted into Ukrainian words as well. In addition to using the Russian alphabet with misapplied orthography, a similar effect is achieved by rendering Russian words using the Ukrainian alphabet, taking advantage of the fact that the Ukrainian and Russian Cyrillic alphabets differ by several key letters and the two languages have different phonological rules. For example, the Russian word *всегда* ‘always’ can be rendered as *всігда*, and *истерика* ‘hysterics’ as *істеріка*, using the distinct Ukrainian letters *i* and *є*.

There are various reasons why people might want to use flagrantly incorrect language. Some people simply enjoy playing with language

and embracing it in all its diversity. Nonstandard usage is by definition informal, and can evoke familiarity and solidarity in interactions, as well as countercultural power. There are also more politically motivated reasons for writing in surzhyk and incorrect orthography. The status of Ukrainian as the state language meant its expanding use in official contexts, and some people felt that this gave the language officialese connotations. Also, the prevalent concerns with purism meant that using standard Ukrainian could make one appear overly proper and pedantic. Therefore, writing in surzhyk with hyper-misspelled forms allowed one to enact criticism of the authorities and solidarity with others subject to the abuses of those authorities. After Yanukovych was officially elected president in 2010, Ukrainian government officials became more and more blatantly corrupt. Those in top positions adhered (at least partly) to the requirement to use Ukrainian in public appearances, although it was well known that their preferred language was Russian. Indeed, the Yanukovych government worked to establish an official status for Russian, at least regionally. Thus while Ukrainian language connoted officialese, standard Russian could be taken as unpatriotic. Rejection of both Ukrainian and Russian linguistic standards can be understood as a metonymic rejection of the existing social order.

Languages of Protest

Conflict with the government came to a head in November 2013, when President Yanukovych declined to sign an economic agreement that had been planned with the European Union, instead taking a bailout loan from Russia. Protesters assembled in the central Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kyiv to protest this move, and they were violently dispersed by riot police on the night of November 30. The brutal beatings by the police were filmed on smartphones and circulated on social media, spreading awareness and outrage among the Ukrainian public. In the next days hundreds of thousands gathered on the Kyiv Maidan, and in the squares of other Ukrainian cities, to protest not just for economic ties with Europe, but for human rights and rule of law. A tent city surrounded by barricades was erected on the Maidan, which included grassroots-organized services including food, medical help, telecommunications, and a 24-hour stage on which a wide array of

speakers and musicians performed. In addition to Kyivites, people came from all over Ukraine to join the Maidan protests. Thus the Maidan became a showcase for the diversity of linguistic practices of people who supported a European course for the country, including Russian and Ukrainian speakers with standard and nonstandard speech. Political rhetoric had often depicted Ukraine as divided between ethnolinguistic Ukrainians and Russians, but the Maidan protests displayed that this was not the case. While during my 2009 research I had encountered many people who were ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians who were proud to define themselves as patriots of Ukraine, stereotypes of ethnolinguistic allegiance still persisted and needed to be overtly challenged. One protester proudly displayed on a poster that he is “a Russophone Ukrainian nationalist,” and in interviews and performances, many others likewise declared that their Russian language preference did not mean wanting closer ties with Russia, and did not diminish their desire for an independent, European Ukraine.¹⁷

The protest environment rekindled people’s optimism and desire for a fairer government, which had been dulled by the lack of results from the 2004 Orange Revolution. The spirit of idealism and defiance also spurred active play and innovation in language. New social formations evoked neologisms, such as *titushky* for hired thugs, *avtomaidan* for the vehicle-based portion of the protest movement, and *antymaidan* for the pro-government gatherings where protesters were paid to appear.¹⁸

The aggressive power of linguistic vulgarities was also harnessed to criticize and fight corrupt authorities. The desire to express outrage transcended people’s usual self-censorship, and vulgar expressions saw widespread public use in speech, posters, and graffiti. Russia’s President Putin was referred to as *Путін Хуйло* ‘Putin the dickhead,’ which formed the basis for a chant performed widely at soccer matches and street protests. Another common expression was *Путін піди на хуй*, also referring to male anatomy but which can be roughly translated as “Putin go to hell.” These vulgar expressions were euphemized in various ways, such as through transposition of the first letters, resulting in *Хутін Пуйло*, and through abbreviation, as *ПТН ХЛО* and *ПТН ПНХ* (which are particularly suited for placement on license plates, a popular trend documented on social media). Further euphemization was achieved by taking a diacritic from one letter of a vulgar word and placing it over another, such as the breve from *Й* placed over the *X* in

order to signify Хуйло ‘dickhead.’ Through such linguistic play people navigated the tension between the power of dysphemism and the rules of social propriety.

The linguistic shortcomings of corrupt Ukrainian politicians came into play in challenging their authority. For example, Prime Minister Azarov, a native speaker of Russian who had to use Ukrainian in some of his public appearances, was notorious for misapplying Russian phonology to Ukrainian words. His mispronunciations were featured in numerous internet memes and videos well before the Maidan protests. The fact that some of Azarov’s mispronunciations sounded similar to vulgar or inappropriate words made his speech more laughable. On the basis of his errors, the *Azirivka* language was developed, a phenomenon similar to the Russian Olbanskii. *Azirivka* featured “radical ikavism” (where *o*, *e*, and other vowels could be replaced by *i*) and the over-application of *akanie* (the Russian phonological rule of pronouncing unstressed *o* as *a* after hard consonants, extended to replace almost any *o* with *a*).¹⁹ This play language came to be widely used on the Maidan, including words like бійкіт *biikit* ‘boycott’ and бімба *bimba* ‘bomb’ (бойкот *boikot*, бомба *bomba* in standard Ukrainian).²⁰ Expletives were also euphemized by using *Azirivka* and replacing vowels with *i*, as one protester’s sign read: “Азірів іді на хій” (which would be something like saying “Aziriv go to hill” instead of “Azarov go to hell,” but more vulgar).

Dysphemism became widespread on social media as the conflict with Russia escalated into war. Those who used offensive language defended their need to express themselves as powerfully as possible, and to respond in kind to the pro-Russian side. This trend rekindled interest in the Ukrainian tradition of vulgar language, and earlier studies were recirculated on social media. Others felt that the degradation in language standards was deplorable and reflected degradation in society. The effort to eliminate vulgarities may be seen as an effort to obtain social legitimacy, as in the decree of Igor Strelkov, leader of the separatist Donetsk National Republic, forbidding use of foul language (*maternaia bran* ъ) in his “Novorussia” army.²¹

Along with obscenities, online surzhyk use grew in visibility as the traumatic events in Ukraine progressed. In the winter of 2014 surzhyk writers actively commented on Facebook about the critical situation in the country, and in June 2014 they formed the online group Repka

Club (<http://repka.club>). The name of the club, *repka* ‘little turnip,’ pays homage to cult surzhyk author Les Poderev’ians’kyi, as it is the name of one of his short stories, which is in turn named after a Ukrainian folk tale. Some bloggers who participated in this project used their own names, and others used pseudonyms, including the names of characters in Poderev’ians’kyi’s stories, such as “Grandpa Svyryd Opanasovych” or “Murzyk Vasyliovych, the learned cat.” Repka Club is subtitled *klub boiovoho surzhyku* ‘fighting surzhyk club’—a “fight club” for surzhyk users. The term *boiovyi surzhyk* ‘fighting surzhyk, martial surzhyk’ is modeled after *boiovyi hopak*, the name of a relatively new martial art based on Ukrainian traditional dance. The writers of Repka Club have embraced the term *boiovyi surzhyk*, but many of the posts are not aggressive; rather they carry out their fight through satire of the political situation and solidarity building through intimate writings about everyday life.

In addition to blogs and social media posts, some members of the Repka Club group were interviewed on television and radio, and did public readings of their work. Blogger Tetiana Komyr, who uses the nickname Tatusia Bo (listed in one blog among the “top five Ukrainian bloggers who are surzhyk virtuosos”),²² stated in a televised interview that she and her colleagues use surzhyk “to try to explain processes in society which it is very hard to explain with regular literary language. [...] In society there are phenomena that cannot be expressed in normal words, in the lovely literary Ukrainian language [*ukraïns’koïu literaturnoïu harniysin’koïu movoïu*]. Why ruin the language for such horrid things? Because of that they need to be explained with obscene lexicon, with surzhyk, with a fighting, harsh [*boiovym, zhorstkym*] surzhyk.”²³ While dealing with difficult topics, Tatusia Bo argued that the goal of the Repka Club bloggers is to write in a way that helps tamp down attitudes of panic in society, and to spread positive attitudes and make people smile. Indeed, followers of Tatusia comment that she brings them joy, that they can identify with her, and that they are empowered by her example to express themselves more freely, using surzhyk and obscenities and breaking away from social inhibitions. Supporters of *boiovyi surzhyk* see it as refreshing and authentic. It can express outrage and irony, and also intimacy and solidarity.

The surzhyk used by Repka Club spans a wide range of variation, including regional dialect features from different parts of Ukraine. Not

all surzhyk bloggers are part of this club, for example, independent blogger “Faina Kaplan” was listed along with four Repka writers as one of the top five virtuoso surzhyk bloggers.²⁴ Of those writers who were on Facebook, in January 2017 the most popular was Vitalii Chepynoga, with over one hundred thousand followers. In addition to being a surzhyk blogger, he was also a member of the Ukrainian Parliament.

Celebrating Ukraine’s Homegrown Richness of Regional Dialects

Regional nonstandard dialects became a popular cultural phenomenon in their own right, in both serious and humorous forms. A serious example is *Plyve kacha po Tysyni*, a poignant song in the western Ukrainian Lemko dialect whose lyrics present a dialogue between a son going off to war and his mother about who will bury him if he dies in a foreign land. This song, as performed by the a cappella group Pikardiis’ka Tertsiia, gained national renown in 2014 as the mourning hymn for the protesters killed on the Maidan.

The Nasha Faita studios of Zakarpattia produced various humorous videos and animations that use western Ukrainian Zakarpattian dialect. One example widely circulated on the internet ^{was} a parody of Russian television personality Dmitry Kiselev, who was particularly fervent in presenting anti-Ukraine propaganda.²⁵ Western Ukrainian dialects ^{were} ~~are~~ also featured in the 2015 sitcom *Ostannii Moskal’* (The Last Muscovite), which aired on the 1+1 television channel. *Ostannii Moskal’* is the story of a privileged young man who grew up in Moscow who has to escape to his long-lost uncle in a village in the Carpathian Mountains of Ukraine when his own father ends up in trouble with the Russian mafia. The use of western Ukrainian dialect here can be seen as demeaning, as it is linked to a presentation of provincial stereotypes, but it can also be seen as an embrace of Ukraine’s linguistic diversity in the media.

An example in the genre of satirical newscasting is Roman Vintoniv’s performance of journalist “Michael Shchur,” who is supposed to be a descendant of Ukrainian immigrants to Canada who has returned to his heritage homeland. He frequently wears a shirt that looks like traditional Ukrainian embroidery from afar, but upon closer inspection reveals a pattern composed of QR codes (square barcodes). The character speaks with features that are typical of the pre-Soviet era western Ukrainian

dialect used by older western Ukrainians and diaspora populations. Some of the notable features are heavily assibilated palatalization of soft *s'* and *ts'*, placement of the reflexive *s'a* before verbs (instead of as a suffix as in standard Ukrainian), *-ov* as an instrumental case ending (where *-oiu* would be standard), and various nonstandard lexical items. Vintoniv as Shchur had various regular television programs in 2014–15 on UT1 and on the public television channel Hromads'ke Telebachennia, on which he reported news and interviewed political and cultural personages, combining serious reporting and criticism with humor. One of his reports also featured the richness of Ukrainian obscenities, while taking a right-wing Ukrainian politician to task for using Russian obscenities.²⁶

Regional dialects could be seen as quaint, part of the heritage of the now standard Ukrainian language. However, the current speech practices of people in various regions of Ukraine often combine unique local dialect with Russian features, resulting in language that many would call surzhyk. While writers and performers brought surzhyk and regional dialects into mainstream media, their nonstandard language use was circumscribed as a performance, a temporary choice by people who could also wield the standard. People whose only language was a surzhyk had more difficulty gaining social acceptance. This was highlighted by responses to the speech of Mykhailo Havryliuk after his appointment to Parliament in November 2014. Havryliuk was a farmer and construction worker from a village in Chernivsti oblast who came to Kyiv to join the Maidan protests. He became nationally known and admired for the dignity he maintained when he was taken by the riot police, beaten, stripped, paraded around naked and made to pose for photographs outside in the frigid cold. Havryliuk only had a basic high school education, and the language he spoke was a surzhyk. Havryliuk's speech, when he was interviewed on television, seemed glaringly out of place, underscoring the difficulty of transcending regional and class boundaries that are marked in language. Nevertheless, Havryliuk weathered public appearances with dignity, even though journalists asked demeaning questions about his clothing and his limited knowledge of politics. He maintained his poise, answering questions in a straightforward manner and with unpretentious confidence, asserting that he would learn what he needed to do the job. His television interviews, posted on the internet, led to fervent debates in online forums regarding the role of education and class in relation to social power and political leadership. Commenters were split between finding him ridiculous

as a politician due to his rural origins and lack of education, or seeing him as the rare person with integrity in the government. For example, in comments responding to an interview posted by the 1+1 channel, one commenter wrote, “With three grades of schooling in the village bathhouse he will be voting on laws that 40 million people must live by? Total madness!!!” In contrast, others commented, “I am shocked: he seems to be a simpleton, a ‘village hick,’ uneducated, but his conversation is smarter than many graduates with three diplomas. They won’t break him”; and “I respect Mykhailo, in my view he has folk wisdom, enormous fortitude, and patriotism! Everything else is unimportant.”²⁷

One could occasionally hear speakers of surzhyk and dialects being interviewed on television, but their language appeared to correlate with their status as provincial and poorly educated people. As a Parliamentary Deputy, speaking from a position of social power, Havryliuk disrupted the order in which nonstandard language was marginalized. It remains to be seen if his example will lead to greater acceptance of nonstandard language varieties in the mainstream urban context. In an interview with Michael Shchur, Havryliuk occasionally corrected Russified lexical items into standard Ukrainian ones after hearing the Ukrainian alternative.²⁸ His self-correction points to an acknowledgment that his language is deficient, and that he may seek to correct it as time goes on. It is also interesting to note that in a transcription provided along with the video of another interview, Havryliuk’s actual words were changed into standard Ukrainian, underscoring the view that surzhyk is inappropriate for serious documentation.²⁹

Russian Ukrainian and Other Languages of Ukraine

The main focus of discourses about language in Ukraine has been on the degree of use and correctness of the Ukrainian language. However, Russian language in Ukraine has also been the focus of ideological debates, and the purist tendency affected judgments of its quality as well. As a response to the critique of the poor quality of Ukrainian, some would say that the Russian language spoken in Ukraine is equally far from standard. Others have suggested, to get away from Russia’s presumption of authority, that a “Ukrainian Russian language” be defined, in contrast to “Russian Russian.”³⁰

The salience of differences between the Russian language as spo-

ken in Russia and Ukraine was highlighted during the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Although Russia denied sending troops and argued that the separatist movement was run by local residents, observers frequently commented on the markedly non-local pronunciation of the militants. Lexicon also served as a shibboleth: the use of the non-local term *porebrik* ‘curb’ by a militant caught on video during the seizure of the Ministry of Internal Affairs building in Kramatorsk on 13 April 2014 was circulated as proof of the involvement of combatants from Russia.³¹ Its use was also noted in a separate incident on 9 January 2015. The unfamiliar term *porebrik* stood out as it is generally used only in the St. Petersburg area of Russia. Elsewhere, including in the Russian language of Ukraine, the corresponding term is *bordiur*. In Ukraine, the term *brovka* is also used.

I have focused so far on Ukrainian and Russian in the Ukrainian linguistic landscape, but the use of other languages in popular culture is worth noting. Many English-origin words have entered Ukrainian and Russian usage in Ukraine (especially in the areas of technology, market economy, and slang), and official signage is sometimes provided in English alongside Ukrainian. As is the case globally, English-language music is popular. In addition to imported music, some Ukrainian artists create and perform their own songs in English. Other Western languages are less well represented. In the three “hit parade” concerts that I attended in Kyiv in 2009, song lyrics also included some French, Italian, and Spanish.³² In all of these examples, the use of Western European languages was a clear borrowing, a link to the foreign symbolic capital of these languages.

A different relationship to other languages and ethnicities was evident in a media campaign conducted in 2010 by the Inter television channel to commemorate the nineteenth anniversary of Ukraine’s independence.³³ This campaign featured video clips of fourteen different ethnic groups in Ukraine performing a brief skit and then singing the Ukrainian national anthem in their own language. The videos included Azeri, Armenian, Belarusian, Gagauz, Greek, Georgian, Hungarian, Yiddish, Polish, Roma, Romanian, Russian, Tatar, and Ukrainian groups. Ukrainian subtitles translated the non-Ukrainian speech, and during the singing Ukrainian text on the screen stated “We are diverse, but we are united” and listed the size of the population of that ethnic group living in Ukraine. This media campaign presented Ukraine as

an inclusive multilingual, multiethnic country. Even the clip that was in Ukrainian strove to present diversity by including Ukrainians who were visibly diverse, such as some who had African heritage. In that video the on-screen message stated, “Ukraine is the homeland of 46 million Ukrainian citizens of different nations and faiths.” In practice, state support for other languages native to citizens of Ukraine is more limited, and they have little visibility in the media. There do exist state schools that offer instruction in languages other than Ukrainian, but not in all of the languages represented in the Inter video campaign.³⁴

The inclusion of people of different ethnicities and faiths became a key feature of the Maidan protests and new government, and this was publicized in response to Russian propaganda that attempted to depict the movement as fascist.³⁵ Flags of different countries were displayed in the protest encampment, and public prayers were led by Muslim, Jewish, and Christian clergy. However, publicized interactions were largely limited to the Ukrainian and Russian languages. As the war with Russia continues, the politicization of language choice continues to be debated. While some people reject the politicization of language in favor of focusing on other issues such as rooting out corruption, others are making the switch to Ukrainian from Russian out of ideological conviction.³⁶ Thus the construction of a pluralistic civic Ukrainian nation that supports bilingualism or multilingualism is in tension with a history shaped by ethnolinguistic allegiances. The Ukrainian language continues to carry symbolic power, representing the country’s right to sovereignty, and specifically representing opposition to Russia’s imperialist aspirations.

Conclusions

In this paper I have traced the ebbs and flows of language ideologies and practices in Ukraine. In the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years (late 1980s to early 1990s), there were two opposing tendencies evident in language use and ideology. On the one hand, perestroika and the easing of restrictions on public expression had led to more open rebellion and experimentation with language and cultural styles. This rebellious experimental tendency was counteracted by a tendency to seek legitimacy by reinforcing existing standards and sources of authority of Ukrainianness. Disdain for surzhyk as emblematic of Ukrainian shame

and low-self worth led to a trend of intense purism, in which surzhyk use took on overwhelmingly derogatory connotations. While purism currently remains significant, alternate ideologies and practices have come to the fore. There is a growing sphere of nonstandard language use, language mixing, and play with language. Nonstandard language is being used in broadcast media and in interpersonal communications for its expressivity, solidarity-building, and subversive power. The possible ideological shift from intense purism to greater linguistic pluralism can be understood as a reflection of changing societal levels of confidence in the country's sovereignty and in the stability of Ukrainian as the state language. The more comfort and confidence there is in the status of Ukrainian, the less anxiety one would expect about language choice and nonstandard variations and mixtures. However, in the current state of war with Russia, the impetus for purist ideologies and the politicization of language choice is still significant.

Notes

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