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# BILINGUALISM IN TIMES OF WAR. THE UKRAINIAN CASE

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***Abstract.*** *This paper examines changes in bilingual practices in Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian war, with particular attention to language choice and identity under conditions of conflict. The study shows that while Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism persists, its social and symbolic meanings have shifted. Ukrainian increasingly functions as a marker of civic and moral identification, whereas Russian is limited to more restricted communicative contexts.*

## 1. Introduction

Language is one of the most sensitive markers of identity, solidarity, and power, especially under extreme conditions such as war. In Ukraine, bilingualism—primarily the coexistence of Ukrainian and Russian—has long been a constitutive feature of daily life. However, its symbolic and pragmatic dimensions have changed profoundly since the onset of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Before 2022, Ukrainian society was characterized by stable, though asymmetrical, bilingualism [2], [17]. Russian dominated in urban communication, media, and informal speech, while Ukrainian maintained its prestige through institutional and symbolic presence in education and state communication. Yet the war has turned language into an overt ideological marker. For millions of Ukrainians, linguistic choice is no longer neutral; it has become an act of identification and resistance.

## 2. Literature Review

Bilingualism, broadly understood as the regular use of two or more languages within an individual or community, has been widely studied in sociolinguistics [23], [12], [10], introduced the concept of “reversing language shift” (RLS), emphasizing the importance of social conditions that enable minority languages to regain vitality. In the Ukrainian context, RLS manifests through the spontaneous, bottom-up spread of Ukrainian in everyday domains.

Spolsky [22] views language policy as the interaction between language practices, beliefs, and management—an approach relevant to understanding wartime Ukraine, where state efforts to promote Ukrainian coincide with voluntary social realignment. Gumperz [13] and Auer [1] highlight code-switching as a social strategy that reflects situational identity negotiation. Under war conditions, such negotiation acquires moral significance: language use becomes a performative act of belonging.

Cross-national comparison is essential to understanding how conflict and sociopolitical crises shape language ideologies and practices. Ukraine's wartime bilingualism finds numerous parallels in other post-conflict and post-imperial contexts, including the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Baltic states. These regions demonstrate that linguistic realignment during and after conflict is rarely linear or unidimensional—it often combines symbolic, emotional, and pragmatic factors [21], [22].

In the Balkans, for instance, the disintegration of Serbo-Croatian after the Yugoslav wars illustrated how linguistic differentiation can become a form of "national purification" [11]. Each successor state redefined its national language, promoting lexical and orthographic divergence to reinforce sovereignty [7]. This process resonates with Ukraine's gradual lexical Ukrainization after 2022, when words and expressions perceived as "Russified" began to be systematically replaced in media and education.

Similarly, post-Soviet Georgia witnessed a language shift in the early 1990s, when the reassertion of Georgian as the sole state language was framed as an act of cultural decolonization [4]. However, in Georgia, the shift was institutionally driven—through state policy and education—whereas in Ukraine, it is largely grassroots and affective. Spolsky [22] identifies this as an "ideological reversal": language change initiated from below, preceding and later legitimizing state action.

In the Baltic republics, Estonia and Latvia provide another relevant precedent. Both countries introduced comprehensive language laws to re-establish the primacy of their titular languages following decades of Russification. Studies by Hogan-Brun et al. [14] and Pavlenko [19] emphasize that these changes were accompanied by emotional tension and generational divides similar to those observed in Ukraine today. The Ukrainian case, however, differs in its ongoing simultaneity of conflict and reform. The war has not merely revived historical grievances but also accelerated the emotional re-territorialization of language.

Shohamy [21] describes this dynamic as language as ideology in motion: linguistic policies and social practices continually respond to changing power relations. In wartime Ukraine, the ideological meanings of Ukrainian and Russian

have undergone radical reinterpretation. The emotional index of Ukrainian—as a marker of solidarity, sacrifice, and resilience—now outweighs its pragmatic value. Conversely, Russian's communicative utility persists, but its symbolic value is contested.

Comparative evidence suggests that post-conflict societies typically experience three stages of linguistic transformation: (1) moral revaluation of languages; (2) institutionalization of the preferred code; and (3) stabilization through intergenerational transmission [9], [10]. Ukraine currently stands between stages one and two, where public sentiment precedes formal policy reform. This liminal phase makes Ukraine a unique empirical case: linguistic realignment emerges in real time, under existential threat, rather than retrospectively.

As Pavlenko [18] and Masenko [17] observe, Ukrainian bilingualism is not collapsing but rather being re-negotiated. The persistence of Russian in limited contexts—especially in private and diasporic communication—mirrors patterns seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Serbo-Croatian variants coexist under distinct symbolic labels. Therefore, the Ukrainian transformation does not imply linguistic monism but a re-semanticization of bilingual coexistence, aligning it with ethical and civic values.

These comparative insights underline that language conflict, though traumatic, often produces a long-term consolidation of linguistic self-awareness. As Spolsky [22] aptly notes, linguistic crisis is a laboratory of identity, revealing how communities reconstruct themselves through language.

Studies of Ukrainian bilingualism before 2022 emphasize its hybridity and fluidity rather than strict separation of codes. Bilaniuk [2] described "surzhyk"—a mixed Ukrainian-Russian vernacular—as a sociolect bridging urban and rural identities. Pavlenko [18], [19] analyzed post-Soviet multilingualism as a field of competing ideologies, where linguistic choices reflect political allegiances and postcolonial hierarchies.

Kulyk [16] observed that even after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, Russian retained symbolic prestige in many professional and media contexts, while Ukrainian expanded mainly in education and administration. Masenko [17] characterized Ukraine's situation as "asymmetrical bilingualism", a condition where two languages coexist but do not enjoy equal status or emotional weight.

In the wake of the full-scale war, however, researchers have documented rapid linguistic and ideological change. Bilaniuk [2] notes that Ukrainian is increasingly viewed as a moral rather than merely communicative code. This aligns with Pavlenko's [19] notion of "affective bilingualism", where language becomes a vehicle for emotional and ethical positioning.

An important domain where linguistic attitudes have transformed most visibly is the Ukrainian armed forces and volunteer networks. Since 2022, Ukrainian

has become not only the institutional language of command but also a marker of mutual trust and emotional solidarity among soldiers. Informal communication within the army increasingly reflects what Masenko [17] calls *the civic ethic of speech*—a shared belief that speaking Ukrainian demonstrates respect for fellow servicemen and for the nation itself.

Another notable phenomenon is the *linguistic mediation* between Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking soldiers. In mixed units, bilingual members often act as informal translators, ensuring cohesion without enforcing linguistic conformity. This practice embodies what Spolsky [22] would describe as *bottom-up language management*—language planning enacted by individuals rather than institutions.

**3. Discussion**

The Ukrainian case demonstrates how war catalyzes language shift beyond institutional language policy. Spolsky's [22] model of language management emphasizes the interplay between ideology, practice, and policy. In wartime Ukraine, this triangle is reorganized: ideology drives practice, which in turn influences future policy.

Bilingualism remains a communicative necessity, especially in interactions involving displaced persons, mixed families, or military coordination. However, the indexical meanings of Ukrainian and Russian have been dramatically reconfigured. Ukrainian now indexes "authenticity", "courage", and "unity", while Russian indexes "past", "distance", and "ambivalence".

This symbolic inversion echoes Fishman's [10] concept of "reversing language shift", yet it occurs organically, propelled by collective trauma and moral reorientation. As Masenko [17] argues, linguistic choice in Ukraine has become a form of civic ethics rather than state obligation.

Since 2022, the rapid expansion of the Ukrainian diaspora has turned displaced communities abroad into an important extension of the national linguistic ecosystem. Dispersed across Europe, North America, and other regions, these populations actively participate in sustaining and reshaping Ukrainian language use beyond the territorial boundaries of the state. Digital communication among these communities—on Telegram, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok—has fostered what Pavlenko [19] calls "transnational affective bilingualism".

Analyses of digital communication within Ukrainian refugee communities indicate a marked increase in the use of Ukrainian in online interaction after 2022. Many users describe the shift to Ukrainian as a "psychological anchor" that reinforces belonging and continuity despite physical displacement. Similar patterns have been observed in studies of migration-based multilingualism, which show that diasporic language practices simultaneously sustain and transform homeland identities [4].

Digital environments also enable symbolic acts of linguistic activism. Volunteer translators localize news and humanitarian information into Ukrainian, often bypassing state institutions. These grassroots translation practices exemplify what Shohamy [21] describes as *de facto language policy*: non-institutional but socially effective regulation of linguistic norms. Through this digital Ukrainization, diasporic communities contribute to maintaining language vitality abroad, turning exile into a productive linguistic space.

Another striking phenomenon of wartime bilingualism is the emergence of what Masenko [17] calls *linguistic morality*. In contrast to earlier pragmatic bilingualism, language choice now conveys ethical judgment. For many Ukrainians, speaking Ukrainian is not merely patriotic—it is perceived as an act of respect toward soldiers, refugees, and victims of aggression.

Edwards [9] and Pavlenko [18] highlight that such moralization of language is a hallmark of societies undergoing rapid identity redefinition. It reinforces social cohesion while simultaneously producing tension among bilinguals who continue to use Russian for pragmatic reasons. The resulting ambivalence—linguistic loyalty versus communicative comfort—represents a new psychological dimension of bilingualism that warrants deeper investigation.

Mass media amplify this moral dynamic. Ukrainian-language music, cinema, and journalism have gained unprecedented popularity, while Russian-language productions face public criticism or self-censorship. YouTube channels like *Ukrainer*, *History Lab UA*, and *Telebachennia Toronto* exemplify a new wave of digital patriotism, combining humor with civic education. This reorientation reflects what Spolsky [22] defines as “language policy through culture”—when art and entertainment become de facto tools of national consolidation.

The long-term implications of this linguistic morality are profound. First, it may reshape the intergenerational transmission of bilingualism. Children born after 2022 will likely perceive Ukrainian not only as the default communicative medium but as the “emotionally correct” one. Second, it redefines the ethics of translation and interpretation: translators increasingly prioritize Ukrainian even when Russian versions are readily available, asserting symbolic resistance through language mediation.

At the same time, this moralization entails potential risks. As Shohamy [21] warns, when linguistic behavior becomes an index of loyalty, it can marginalize those unable to conform for historical or personal reasons. Some elderly bilinguals or minorities (e.g., in Odesa or Kharkiv) may experience pressure to abandon Russian, even if it remains part of their identity. Balancing civic unity and linguistic inclusivity will therefore remain one of Ukraine’s major post-war challenges. The digital environment mirrors and amplifies these transformations. Ukrainian has

become the dominant language in online journalism, podcasts, and YouTube content. Even influencers previously associated with Russian-language audiences have transitioned to Ukrainian.

At the same time, Russian remains partially functional in digital diplomacy, cross-border communication, and humanitarian coordination, illustrating what Gumperz [13] called *contextualized code-switching* — pragmatic, not ideological. Educational institutions across Ukraine have implemented accelerated Ukrainization of curricula, textbooks, and communication. In universities, Russian-language courses were either converted to Ukrainian or discontinued. However, researchers such as Kulyk [16] caution against equating linguistic Ukrainization with ideological uniformity; bilingualism still underlies the academic and cultural competence of many Ukrainians.

The shift toward Ukrainian-medium education reinforces intergenerational stability of language use, contributing to Fishman's [10] *intergenerational transmission principle* — the ultimate measure of language vitality. The linguistic transformations observed during the full-scale war extend beyond policy or communication—they touch on psychological adaptation and collective trauma. Language has become a key medium through which Ukrainians articulate resilience, anxiety, and hope. Scholars of linguistic anthropology note that in times of crisis, linguistic choice often functions as a coping mechanism [6]. For Ukrainians, shifting from Russian to Ukrainian has often been described as a form of emotional self-protection and social belonging rather than a purely political statement.

Psychologically, language can encode trauma. As Pavlenko [18] emphasizes, the semantic field of Ukrainian has undergone revaluation: words related to war, suffering, and resistance have acquired sacred or elevated meanings. Everyday expressions such as "Glory to Ukraine" or "thank you for your service" have shifted from slogans to ritualized speech acts that sustain collective morale. This re-semantization blurs the line between civic and religious discourse, creating what Spolsky [22] calls "linguistic sacralization"—a process where language becomes the vessel of ethical experience.

Furthermore, bilingual Ukrainians often report *linguistic guilt*—the feeling of moral inconsistency when reverting to Russian out of habit. Similar patterns have been documented in other post-conflict societies, such as post-Franco Spain and post-apartheid South Africa, where speakers of the formerly dominant language experience moral unease. In Ukraine, however, this tension is intensified by the immediacy of war and ongoing aggression. The result is not a simple language shift but a profound emotional negotiation within the self.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this psychological bilingualism challenges binary models of language dominance. Instead of viewing Ukrainian and Russian

as competing systems, current realities suggest a fluid repertoire model, where individuals dynamically reallocate emotional and functional roles between codes [3]. For example, while Ukrainian serves as the language of public life and civic engagement, Russian may remain associated with childhood memories, humor, or family intimacy. The coexistence of these emotional registers explains why total language abandonment is rare even among strongly pro-Ukrainian speakers.

Ultimately, the ongoing linguistic realignment in Ukraine is as much a process of emotional recovery as it is of national consolidation. Language provides a sense of stability amid uncertainty, allowing individuals to reaffirm who they are, what they value, and to whom they belong. As Pavlenko [19] notes, the Ukrainian case teaches us that "linguistic identity can become an instrument of psychological resilience". This dimension deserves greater attention in future sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic research.

**4. Conclusions**

The study confirms that the Russo-Ukrainian war has profoundly altered the linguistic ecology of Ukraine. Key findings include:

• Ukrainian has evolved from a national to a moral lingua franca**,** symbolizing resilience and unity.

• Russian, though still present, has been functionally narrowed and emotionally redefined**.**

• Bilingualism remains a pragmatic bridge, yet its ideological underpinnings have shifted.

• Wartime conditions have accelerated bottom-up language policy, driven by civic motivation rather than state enforcement.

In theoretical terms, the Ukrainian case exemplifies a rare instance of *conflict-induced language shift* (Spolsky, 2009), where emotional solidarity replaces institutional pressure as the main driver of linguistic transformation.

Looking ahead, Ukraine's linguistic landscape is poised for further transformation. The war has accelerated processes that might otherwise have taken decades: spontaneous Ukrainization, de-Russification of public space, and redefinition of bilingual identity.

Ukrainian experience demonstrates that bilingualism in times of war is not a symptom of division but a mechanism of adaptation. Far from eroding national unity, it redefines belonging through empathy, ethics, and choice. As Pavlenko (2008) notes, "language is no longer what we speak—it is what we stand for". The post-war challenge will be to preserve this ethical dimension while restoring normalcy to linguistic life.

The post-war reconstruction of Ukraine offers an opportunity to redefine linguistic education and policy from the ground up. A comprehensive national

language strategy should not only promote Ukrainian but also ensure inclusivity for all linguistic communities. Based on the empirical and comparative evidence discussed above, several recommendations emerge.

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