

The Transformation of Bilingualism in Ukraine: Language Practices and National Identity

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*Nations do not die of a heart attack.
First their language is taken away
(Lina Kostenko)*

1. Introduction

Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism is one of the defining characteristics of Ukraine’s linguistic landscape, shaped by the historical and political conditions under which Ukrainian and Russian languages have functioned and developed. These historical conditions continued to shape language use after Ukraine gained independence in 1991. For a long while, the use of Russian had been seen as a common part of everyday bilingualism, and the choice of a dominant language of communication did not necessarily carry political or identity-related meanings. Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022 changed the social context of language choice. One manifestation of this transformation has been a noticeable shift toward Ukrainian in the choice of language for everyday communication within the Ukrainian–Russian language pair. Ukrainian has acquired significance not only as a means of everyday interaction but also in relation to national belonging. It is particularly important that these changes are occurring among people for whom Russian was previously the dominant language of everyday communication. Thus, the transformation of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism after 2022 involves not only a change in the share of the two languages used but also a change in the meaning of language choice.

This study focuses on the relationship between national self-identification and the shift in the dominant language of everyday communication.

2. Research context

Research on Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism shows that language practices in Ukraine have historically developed under conditions of asymmetry between the two languages. In particular, Russian held a higher status in many areas of social life for a long time, which contributed to its widespread use in everyday communication (Bilaniuk, 2005). Pavlenko

(2008), in turn, examines Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism in the context of imperial and Soviet linguistic history and views it as a consequence of the colonial legacy.

The Ukrainian case of bilingualism is complex and often characterized by a mismatch between language practices and national identity. For a long time, the widespread use of Russian in Ukraine was a common feature of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism, shaped by imperial and Soviet language policies. At the same time, the language a person predominantly used in everyday communication did not necessarily correspond to how they identified themselves ethnically (Kulyk, 2011). Thus, the use of Russian did not necessarily mean that a person did not identify as Ukrainian. Studies conducted before the full-scale invasion show that Russian-speaking citizens could have a Ukrainian identity that did not necessarily involve an exclusive use of Ukrainian (Bilaniuk, 2010; Kulyk, 2011, 2016; Bureiko & Moga, 2019).

Ukrainian sociolinguistic studies show a connection between the language used in everyday communication and national self-identification. In particular, Zalizniak's (2023) study, based on a survey of Kyiv residents conducted in 2020, showed that the language used in everyday communication and the language identified as native may be related to aspects of Ukrainian national identity. This study is important for understanding the relationship between language and national identity before the full-scale invasion. At the same time, Zalizniak's study focuses on Kyiv residents and reflects the situation before the full-scale invasion, whereas the present study focuses on wider trends in language choice after 2022.

In everyday bilingual communication, language choice depends on the specific communicative situation, the interlocutor, and the nature of the interaction (De Houwer, 2018). In Ukrainian society, Ukrainian and Russian could be used differently, depending on the family environment, social surroundings, and communicative context. Therefore, before the full-scale invasion, using Russian more often in everyday communication did not necessarily mean that a person did not self-identify as Ukrainian.

Research on language change in Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale war shows a transformation in language practices and attitudes toward Ukrainian and Russian. Malash (2023), analysing social media discussions and interviews with “non-public representatives of the society,” shows growing attention to the role of Ukrainian and to switching to Ukrainian among Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Rabus (2025), in turn, focuses on the linguistic creativity on Twitter in Ukrainian after the Russian invasion. Analysing Ukrainian-language posts on Twitter during 2022, the author shows how users employ lexical, orthographic, and grammatical devices, including modified forms of words and non-standard spelling, such as “Mock Russian,” to express resistance to Russian aggression. This shows that in wartime, language practices can acquire additional social meanings.

Other studies link changes in the language practices of media actors to national self-identification. For example, Orobchuk (2024) shows that respondents describe the language shift and explain their choice of language in communicating with their audiences, families, and society in terms of identity positioning and collective unity. Finnin and Kozachenko (2022), based on interviews with Ukrainian cultural actors and an analysis of literary and film texts, show that Ukrainian cultural producers can

simultaneously recognize Ukraine's linguistic diversity and attach a particular importance to Ukrainian language as a factor in national consolidation.

After 2022, researchers have increasingly interpreted the shift to Ukrainian as a conscious personal choice. Kudriavtseva (2025) shows that the transition from Russian to Ukrainian intensified after the full-scale invasion and that Ukrainian increasingly came to be perceived as a symbol of national solidarity. Based on biographical interviews with 21 «new full-time Ukrainian speakers», the study examines language ideologies underlying this transition, focusing on how new speakers legitimize their use of Ukrainian and challenge the established linguistic hierarchies.

Despite the considerable research on this topic, recent literature has focused mainly on language practices in media discourse, social media, language activism, and the experiences of new Ukrainian speakers. Less attention has been paid to changes in the dominant language of everyday communication among the general population in Ukraine after 2022 and their relationship to national self-identification. This is the focus of the present study.

Hypothesis. After 2022, language choice has increasingly acquired a conscious and identity-related dimension. Among ordinary citizens, the shift to Ukrainian can serve as one of the ways of expressing national identity.

The aim of the study is to identify the trends in language choices after 2022 and to analyse their relationship with national self-identification, and what social significance has language choice acquired after 2022.

3. Theoretical Framework

Contemporary research on multilingualism increasingly examines the relationship between language and identity by taking into account specific social contexts and language practices. Ayres-Bennett and Fisher (2022) emphasize that the relationship between language and identity depends on the social and communicative context in which languages are used. This approach makes it possible to view language choice not only as a choice between languages but also as part of the processes through which identity is expressed and formed (Ayres-Bennett & Fisher, 2022). In my study, this approach is important for examining changes in Ukrainians' language choice after 2022, when the choice between Ukrainian and Russian takes place in the context of the full-scale invasion and may acquire additional significance as a way of expressing a personal position and a national belonging.

For examining changes in language choice in the Ukrainian–Russian bilingual context and their relationship to the identity-related significance of the Ukrainian language, the study draws on three theoretical propositions.

The first is based on understanding bilingualism not as the simple coexistence of two language systems, but as a set of sociolinguistic practices shaped by specific historical conditions (Heller, 2007). Spolsky (2004) views language practices in terms of how people actually use language and make language choices in everyday life.

The second proposition is about language choice. In bilingual communication, language choice depends on the communicative situation, the interlocutor, and the nature of the interaction. Therefore, language choice is not a fixed characteristic of a bilingual speaker

and may change in response to the broader social context (De Houwer, 2018). In the Ukrainian context, this means that changes in sociopolitical conditions may affect the balance between Ukrainian and Russian in everyday communication.

The third proposition concerns the identity-related significance of language choice. Within this framework, language practices are viewed as one of the ways in which people express their identities (Ayres-Bennett & Fisher, 2022). A conscious change in everyday language practices, including a shift from Russian to Ukrainian, may acquire symbolic significance and be related to the construction of personal identity and national belonging (Bilaniuk, 2020). This proposition makes it possible to view changes in language choice after 2022 as a change in the meaning that speakers attribute to their language preference.

Key Concepts

In this study, the key concepts are based on the sociolinguistic understanding of bilingualism as a social practice (Heller, 2007), the concept of language choice in bilingual interaction (De Houwer, 2018), and the approach to language practices as actual language behaviour (Spolsky, 2004). The concept of national self-identification is considered in the light of Ukrainian research on the relationship between language and national identity (Zalizniak, 2023).

Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism is understood in this study as the coexistence and use of Ukrainian and Russian within the same community, or by individual members of that community, in different communicative situations. Bilingualism does not imply the equal use of the two languages: one language may be dominant in everyday communication, while the other may remain functionally present in certain diverse domains.

Dominant language of everyday communication refers to the language that a person predominantly uses in everyday interpersonal communication: at home, with friends and acquaintances, in shops, on public transport, and in other everyday situations.

Language choice refers to the choice of language for communication (Ukrainian, Russian, or both), in a particular situation.

Language practices refer to the actual use of language in communication. In this study, the main focus is on the language people choose for everyday interpersonal dialogues.

National self-identification in this study refers to how a person defines their own belonging to the Ukrainian national community and how they relate this belonging to the language of communication.

In this study, the concepts of *national identity* and *national belonging* are used synonymously to refer to an individual's self-identification as Ukrainian, as well as their awareness and sense of belonging to the Ukrainian national community.

4. Methodology

The methodological basis of the study is an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the conceptual foundations of sociolinguistics, particularly the approaches to the analysis of language practices and language choice. The study is analytical in nature and is based on a systematic review of the relevant literature, a secondary analysis of data from nationwide sociological surveys, and a selective analysis of relevant empirical studies and materials.

The study uses quantitative findings from nationwide surveys conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), the Rating Sociological Group, and the Razumkov Centre to examine changes in language choice. These data make it possible to trace changes in the use of Ukrainian and Russian across different periods and to identify trends in everyday communication after 2022. All nationwide sociological surveys used in the study were conducted on the territories controlled by the Ukrainian government and did not include residents of temporarily occupied territories or Ukrainians living abroad. Therefore, the findings of this study concerning language choice primarily apply to the population of Ukraine living on the government-controlled territory.

For comparison and interpretation of the observed trends, the study also draws on findings from relevant empirical research. Public and digital material is used as an additional source for identifying changes in the expression of identity through language.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Changes in Language Choice and its Social Significance

The survey data show a steady shift in language practices towards Ukrainian. According to KIIS, between 2017 and 2022, the share of respondents who preferred Ukrainian for everyday communication increased from 49% to 58%, while the share of those who predominantly or exclusively used Russian decreased from 26% to 15% (Kulyk, 2023b). These figures indicate a shift towards Ukrainian in everyday language practices and reflect an increased share of respondents preferring Ukrainian for everyday communication, particularly evident following the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022.

These trends are also reflected in data from the Rating Sociological Group. In 2022, 48% of respondents reported that they mainly spoke Ukrainian at home, while another 33% used both Ukrainian and Russian. By 2024, the share of those who used only or mainly Ukrainian had increased to 59%, while the share of those who used both languages had decreased to 28% (Rating Sociological Group, 2024).

Thus, between 2022 and 2024, the shift in language dominance shows that Ukrainian is increasingly becoming the main language of everyday communication, while the use of Russian is declining. At the same time, the continued use of both languages by some respondents shows that this shift does not mean the disappearance of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism. These changes in language choice are particularly important for understanding whether and how language choice has acquired greater significance for the national self-identification after 2022.

In this context, the question arises whether this change in the language balance is accompanied by a change in the meaning of language choice. Bilaniuk (2020) describes conscious changes in everyday language practices, including a shift from Russian to Ukrainian, as linguistic conversion, which may have a symbolic significance and be related to identity. Kudriavtseva (2025), in her study of new Ukrainian speakers, shows that after the full-scale invasion, the shift to Ukrainian may go beyond a change in communication habits and acquire personal and identity-related significance.

The change in language choice is therefore related not only to the language used for communication but also to the way people express their personal and national belonging. For some speakers, the shift to Ukrainian represents a more conscious change in everyday language practice than simply a change in the frequency of use. Accordingly, the transformation of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism involves not only a change in the balance between the two languages, but also a change in the meaning that speakers attach to their own language choice.

This trend is consistent with the data from the Razumkov Centre, which indicate not only an increase in the use of Ukrainian but also changes in its social status and its relationship to national identity. In June 2024, 78% of respondents identified Ukrainian as their native language, compared with 60% in 2015. Ukrainian was identified as the language predominantly spoken at home by 70.5% of respondents, compared with 50% in 2015 (Razumkov Centre, 2024).

The changing social significance of Ukrainian language is also reflected in its perception in interpersonal communication. In 2024, 75.5% of respondents considered Ukrainian a more prestigious language for communication with friends and colleagues at work or study, compared with 43% in 2015. Over the same period, the share of respondents who preferred Russian in this context decreased from 21.5% to 6% (Razumkov Centre, 2024).

Data from the Razumkov Centre also show some changes in how respondents relate the Ukrainian national community to language. In 2024, 21.3% of respondents defined the Ukrainian nation as a community of Ukrainian citizens who speak Ukrainian and follow Ukrainian national traditions, compared with 18% in 2021 (Razumkov Centre, 2024).

These results point to a change in the social context of language choice. Ukrainian is not only being used more often in everyday communication but is also becoming more socially prestigious in interpersonal communication. This provides grounds for viewing language choice as a practice that is increasingly connected not only with its communicative function but also with national self-identification.

The digital environment is also important for studying language choice, as social media make it possible to observe actual language choice and practices (unlike a poll answer which may be influenced by a social desirability bias). A social media user chooses a language not only for a particular interlocutor but also for communication with a potentially wide audience. Therefore, the language of a post becomes a visible part of the user's public self-presentation.

The study by Racek et al. (2024) shows a substantial increase in the shift from Russian to Ukrainian among Twitter/X users in Ukraine after the beginning of the full-scale invasion. The study analysed 4,453,341 geotagged posts created by 62,712 users in Ukraine between 2020 and 2022. The authors found that the shift from Russian to Ukrainian increased substantially after the beginning of the full-scale invasion compared with the pre-war period. These findings demonstrate an important feature of the current language transformation: the shift towards Ukrainian manifests itself in the actual language choice and language practice of speakers.

Thus, the shift towards Ukrainian is noticeable in different spheres of language use and accompanied by a change in the social meaning of language choice.

5.2. Socio-Political Context of the Transformation of Language Choice

Changes in language choice after 2022 have taken place in the context of a change in the social context. One factor in this process was that the Russian authorities themselves gave the language issue a particular political significance. Russian aggression was accompanied by claims about the need to “protect the Russian-speaking population,” while Ukrainian national distinctiveness was systematically denied in the Russian public discourse. In this context, language became the subject of Russian discriminatory information strategies.

In the author’s previous study, manipulative and indirect forms of hate speech in Russian-language online media broadcasts in the occupied territories were analysed (Krylova-Grek, 2022). These materials are relevant to the present study because they demonstrate how Ukrainian language and Ukrainian national identity became targets of symbolic discrediting. Russian discourse promoted narratives that denied the existence of Ukrainians as a distinct nation, described Ukrainian as a “dialect” or “rural vernacular,” and discredited Ukrainian language policy (Krylova-Grek, 2022). Such narratives sought to influence the population in the occupied territories by imposing Russian linguistic and identity models.

A coercive model of language transformation can currently be observed in the temporarily occupied territories. Here, changes in the linguistic environment have occurred not as a result of individual language choice but largely through institutional coercion. After 2022, practices such as the removal of Ukrainian books from library collections, blocking access to Ukrainian educational resources online, and the disappearance of Ukrainian language from educational and public spheres have been documented¹ (OHCHR, 2024; Institute of Mass Information, 2024; OPORA, 2024).

At the same time, as noted above, a contrary process has been observed in the Ukrainian government-controlled territories since 2022: for part of Ukrainian society, the choice of Ukrainian has been increasingly associated with distancing oneself from the Russian cultural and political space.

This contrast highlights different social meanings that language choice can acquire under conditions of war. In the territories controlled by Ukraine, the shift towards Ukrainian function as a voluntary expression of national identity and belonging.

¹ See Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2025, May 28). Russia and Ukrainian Presence in the Occupied Territories [Росія та українська присутність в окупації], <https://rb.gy/z03sc1>; Voice of America (2024, February 10). ISW: Знищення українського населення на окупованих територіях – продумана політика Росії. [ISW: The Destruction of the Ukrainian Population in the Occupied Territories Is a Deliberate Russian Policy]. <https://www.holosameryky.com/a/etnichni-chystky-riosiji-spryamovani-na-te-shob-vtrymaty-ukrjinski-terytoriji/7482424.html>; and Radio Svoboda (2025, March 19). *Tse vzhe navit ne SRSR: na okupovanykh terytoriiakh vyluchyly z uzhytku slovo "ukraintsi"* [Це вже навіть не СРСР: на окупованих територіях вилучили з ужитку слово «українці»], <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/rosiya-ukrayinska-prysutnist-v-okupatsiyi/33752643.html>

6. Conclusions

The findings of the study provide grounds for viewing the transformation of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism after 2022 as a process that involves both a shift towards Ukrainian in the balance between Ukrainian and Russian in everyday communication and a change in the social significance of language practices and language choice and their relation to the national identity. The sociological and empirical data used in the study demonstrate the scale of the shift towards Ukrainian and provide evidence that, for the speakers, this shift has acquired a conscious and identity-related dimension.

First, the survey data show a clear shift in Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism towards Ukrainian. At the same time, the continued use of both languages indicates that this process does not mean the disappearance of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism. Rather, it reflects a change in the relative use of the two languages, with Ukrainian becoming the dominant language of communication.

Second, the findings reveal the nature of the language shift towards Ukrainian. For the ordinary speakers, the shift from Russian to Ukrainian represents a conscious personal choice, with Ukrainian acquiring additional significance in relation to national identity and belonging.

Third, the transformation of language practices can be observed across different areas of language use, including both everyday interpersonal communication and digital communication. The consistency of these trends provides further grounds for viewing the shift towards Ukrainian as part of a broader transformation of language practices after 2022, accompanied by the growing social significance of Ukrainian in expressing national belonging and identity.

Fourth, the transformation of language practices takes place within a radically changed sociopolitical context. Russian aggression has been accompanied by discursive practices denying Ukrainian national distinctiveness and by the systematic displacement of Ukrainian from the linguistic environment in the occupied territories. At the same time, in the territories controlled by Ukraine, the shift towards Ukrainian takes place through individual language choice. This contrast highlights the fundamental difference between the coercive transformation of the linguistic environment in the occupied territories and the change of language practices in the territories controlled by Ukraine.

Overall, the findings suggest that after 2022 language choice has acquired a more conscious and identity-related dimension and that, among ordinary citizens, the shift towards Ukrainian can serve as one of the ways of expressing national identity and belonging.

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