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The language situation in Ukraine

Abstract

It was only in 2001 that Ukraine gained its sovereignty and it heavily determined the linguistic situation of the new state the territory of which used to belong to various states. The development of the Ukrainian language was further endangered when after World War II almost the entire linguistic region became Soviet Ukraine since the Soviet language policy propagated the Russian language as the leading one all over the Union, pushing regional languages into the background. The inland migration within the Union also furthered the spreading of Russian at the expense of Ukrainian. 17% of the inhabitants of independent Ukraine claim to be Russian nationals; in 2001 30% of them regarded Russian as their mother tongue which means that about 15% of Ukrainian nationals have Russian as their mother tongue. In addition an important percentage of the members of minority groups also tend towards choosing Russian as a means toward assimilation.

It is customary among Hungarians to complain about the isolation of the Hungarian language that indeed has its disadvantages: it is a fact that of the inhabitants of the member states of the EU smaller proportions of Hungarians appear to be able to speak foreign languages. Besides the long lasting failure of educational policy the fact has to be accepted that Hungarians are living in greatly monolingual communities and are required to make greater efforts in learning any of the structurally different Indo European languages than the speaker of one IE language acquire another one. It can also be disadvantageous if a language area is surrounded by speakers of languages that are in more or less close relationship with it, and especially if one of these related languages used to function in the community as the administrative and/or literary language too for centuries.

The Ukrainian language – as the other Slavic languages too – is a variety that developed from of the once common Old Slavic language. The differentiation of Old Slavic was complete about the end of the 12th c as witnessed by the last shared Slavic sound change, the loss or vocalisation of ‘*jerek*’ (reduced /i/ and /u/ marked with <ь> and <ѣ> respectively in the early MSS). The development of independent Slavic languages was fairly late and were developing in neighbouring areas this is why they show considerable similarity. Ukrainian is in closest relationship with the two other Eastern Slavic languages, i.e. Russian and Belorussian. The first eastern Slavic state *Rus*’ (*Kiev* being its capital) with its various provinces (*Csernigov*, *Galicja*, *Volhínia*) was established within the proto-Ukrainian dialect territory. Christianity was officially adopted in 988 according to the Byzantine, eastern rite and soon, in the 11th c., the first written documents started appearing. However, it was Old Slavonic (Old Church Slavic, Old Bulgarian) that became the language of liturgy and literature for the Slavic inhabitants of the eastern part of *Rus*’, thanks to biligual missionaries coming from Byzantium. The variety was developed out of southern Slavic (Old Bulgarian – Old Macedonian) dialects by the Macedonian brothers Constantin (Cyrill) and Metod in 863 that did not readily adapt to the eastern Slavic (Russian, later Great Russian and Ukrainian Church Slavic respectively) phonemic and structural characteristics.

In the territory of *Rus*’ there developed functional bilingualism: eastern Slavonic dialects were used in everyday communication and legislation and Church Slavonic for the purposes of higher culture which at the time meant ecclesiastical use. It was a dialect that though was related and thus more or less comprehensible still its mastering required long and intensive study.

Church Slavonic is still the language of liturgy of the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine. The learning of reading and writing was based on texts of the Bible and especially on the Psalms written in Church Slavonic; however, the Cyrillic script became used to write vernacular texts (private letters, legal documents, deeds, testaments, trading contracts) from the 11-12th cc.

From the *Rus*’ period there came down a small number of non-literary type of texts too, representing the vernacular besides the great amount of documents written in Church Slavonic. Their importance

increased when after the Mongol invasion (mid 13th c) the eastern and southern parts of the former Rus' came under the rule of the Polish Kingdom (Galicia) and the Lithuanian Grand Duchy; after the 1386 Polish-Lithuanian personal union practically the whole Ukrainian language area became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Union.

In the 15th c. when the territory of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy reached its largest extension 90% of its population consisted of Orthodox eastern Slaves (the ancestors of present day Ukrainians and Belorussians) thus when the pagan Lithuanians as the last in Europe - converted to Christianity following the Roman rite in 1386 it was impossible to introduce Latin as the official language of the Church - as was the case in Poland; thus in the vast country mainly populated eastern Slavic people Eastern Slavonic became the language of administration that was a compromise between Ukrainian and Belorussian preferring the common elements shared by the eastern dialects of Lithuania and neglecting the special Belorussian and Ukrainian features. This Old Ukrainian - Old Belorussian language (West Russian for short), based on the eastern Slavonic vernaculars, became the medium of the documents (charters, rights, legal decisions etc.) issued by the chancery of the Grand Duchy, and it was imitated by the scribes of the local administrations, too. The chancery language presented the basis for the common Old Ukrainian - Old Belorussian secular literature developed by the 16th c. the medium for literary and historical works, religious writings as well as partial Bible translations thus ending the vernacular East Slavonic and Church Slavonic bilingualism in the Ukrainian and Belorussian region.

The language of officialdom and secular literature was greatly influenced by the Polish language due to the strengthening of the Polish - Lithuanian union. As a result of the 1569 Lublin Union the area of Lithuania with its Ukrainian population were taken under direct Polish rule. Following the 17th c. Cossack uprising the Ukrainian language area east of the River Dnepr was annexed to Russia. The centralising policy of the Russian state and Church the West Russian language was pushed out as the medium on ecclesiastical writing, thus the former Ukrainian - Belorussian literary language - that in spite of its mixed character was close to the speech of the cultivated elements of Ukrainian society - was neglected too; In Russia it was

the Russian language that took over, in Poland the Polish and the Ukrainian population was left without an own literary language that developed of its own speech.

The Ukrainian vernacular appeared only as a characterizing feature in the interludes of school dramas, mainly for comic effects. This comic tradition led Ivan Kotljarevs'ky, the father of the modern Ukrainian literary language, to write his *Aeneis* travesty distributed in hand written copies since 1794 (first printed edition St Petersburg 1842); his other linguistically important work is the play *Natalka Poltavka* (1838), still performed in Ukrainian theatres. Kotljarevs'ky has proved to be a creator of traditions: the new Ukrainian literary language that he based on the south eastern dialect of Poltava reached its classic form in the poetry of Taras Ševčenko (1814–1861) who raised Ukrainian lyric poetry to international heights. Other authors using the Poltava dialect in their works are Ivan Nečuj-Levyč'ky (1838–1918), Marko Vovčok (the literary pen name of Marija Vilins'ka, 1834–1907) and Panas Myrny (1849–1920). After the 1795 division of Poland Galicia became part of the Austrian Monarchy; its most important authors: Ivan Franko (1856–1916), Lesja Ukrajinka (1871–1913), Mychajlo Kocjubyns'ky (1864–1913), shared their role in the cultivation of the Ukrainian literary language. The cultural life in Galicia was especially important at the times when publishing in the Ukrainian language was prohibited in Russia till 1905.

Thus it was important for the language development that the speech area politically belonged to several states before World War II. and its situation was comparable to that of the majority languages. The first printed grammar of modern Ukrainian (Little Russian, Ruthene) was published in Russian by Oleksi Pavlovs'ky (St Petersburg 1818). During the 19th c. no other publication of Ukrainian grammars was allowed in the Russian Empire. In eastern Galicia and Hungary, belonging to the Habsburg Monarchy, there appeared *Grammatica Slavo-Ruthena, seu Vetero-Slavicae, et actu in montibus Carpathicis Parvo-Russicae, ceu dialecti vigentis linguae* by Mihály Lutsckay (Buda 1830) and *Grammatik der Ruthenischen oder Klein-Russischen Sprache in Galizien* by Josip Levyč'ky (Przemyśl 1834). Afterwards there were continuous publications of Ukrainian grammars since the language was part of school education. These grammars propagated the local, west Ukrainian usage.

After the 1905 Russian revolution the prohibition of the use of the Ukrainian language was lifted in east Ukraine belonging to Russia, and several grammars were published as schoolbooks, though only private pupils could use them as the Ukrainian language was not taught in public schools in the Russian Empire. In the period between the two World Wars west Ukraine belonged to Poland and Transcarpathia to Czechoslovakia. In Poland the initially free language use became gradually restricted; in the Transcarpathian region the majority of the local intelligentsia preferred the Russian literary language to Ukrainian.

In the 1920s the Soviet policy permitted the use of the Ukrainian language as the medium of strictly controlled culture with 'social' content in Eastern Ukraine, in order to gain the sympathy of the local and international intelligentsia; the use of it as the language of administration was advertised but never realised. During the 1920s a standardized Ukrainian orthography was established after lengthy debates and the result was published in Kharkov in 1928. Since west Ukrainian experts also participated in the process, the spelling standardisation could be introduced in Polish Ukraine too.

The 'Ukrainian program' stopped around 1928 due to a change of direction of the central policy in Moscow and the Ukrainian intelligentsia was pushed into the background, the possibility of the publication of their work limited. During the time of terror in the 1930s the people of patriotic feelings were systematically wiped out. The peasantry, the keepers of the language were decimated by deportation and deliberately induced famine. The Soviet industrialization created huge industrial cities that attracted masses of people from all the Soviet Union and the common language of the diverse people became Russian as preferred by the central government. Due to terror and mass migration the position of the Ukrainian language weakened already before WW II. In 1939 the Molotov – Ribbentrop pact annexed West Ukraine to the Soviet Union as well as Transcarpathia in 1944 and the restrictions were introduced in these areas too. However, west Ukraine, the former Galicia, kept its role as the mainstay of the Ukrainian literary language and culture in the vernacular all through the existence of the Soviet system characterized by Russification in the name of a the unified Soviet people.

Not only the people were Russified but the language too. Because of the relative short history of the Ukrainian literary language there existed a great variety of pronunciation, grammar, lexicon and phraseology and those items were supported as representing the standard that corresponded with the Russian usage. As part of the 1933 Soviet-Ukrainian orthographic reform, the exclusion of < r > (g) from the Ukrainian alphabet was of symbolic value; the practice was not followed either by Polish-Ukrainians or by emigrants.

After 1917 during the consecutive national and Bolshevik governments, there were school grammars published, later textbooks for the higher education that helped standardize the various Ukrainian literary varieties existing in the SU, especially the textbooks edited by Leonid Bulachov's'ky for colleges in 1931 and for universities in 1951. The largest comprehensive work is the five volume manual of the contemporary Ukrainian language edited by Ivan Bilodid (1969–1973); the separate volumes discuss Ukrainian phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon and phraseology, and style. The standardization of the lexicon started with the help of bilingual dictionaries of which the two-volume *Ruthenisch-deutsches Wörterbuch* by Jevhen Želechiv's'ky and Sofron Nedil's'ky (Lemberg, 1885–1886) is worth mentioning. In Hungary there was the Ruthenian – Hungarian dictionary by László Csopci (Budapest, 1883) and in Russia the four-volume Ukrainian – Russian dictionary edited by Borys Hrinčenko (Kiev, 1907 – 1909). The largest 11 volume monolingual etymological dictionary was published in Kiev between 1970 and 1980.

Apart from the short lived Ukrainian statehood during the Russian revolutions and civil wars following WW I., notwithstanding important for the strengthening of Ukrainian national identity, it was only in 1991 that Ukraine became a sovereign state. The development towards an independent nation was a long and painful process. Till 1944 Ukraine was part of various states, mainly hostilely disposed against each other; since 1944 till the declaration of independence though it formed one state but it was only with nominal independence with quasi-statehood within the Soviet Union (Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic). These circumstances define the position of the Ukrainian language and the state of its standardization.

According to the results of the first independent census in 2001 Ukraine had 48,5 million inhabitants of which 37,5 million (77,8%)

were Ukrainians, 8,3 million (17,3%) Russians. The other minorities did not represent more than 1% each: Belorussian 275,8 thousand (0,6%), Moldavian 258,6 (0,5%), Crimean Tatar 248,2 thousand (0,5%), Bulgarian 204,6 (0,4%), Hungarian 156,6 (0,3%), Romanian 151 thousand (0,3%), Polish 144,1 thousand (0,3%), Jewish 103,6 thousand (0,2%), Armenian 99,9 thousand (0,2%). Other minorities: Greek, Tatar, Roma, Azeri, Georgian, German, Gagauz were represented below 100 thousand members. However, in smaller regions the minorities have higher representation than in the national total: e.g. in Autonomous Republic of Crimea there is a Russian majority of 53,%, Ukrainians 24,3% and Crimean Tatars are the third largest group at 10%; in Bukovine (Czernicvi region) the inhabitants claiming to be Romanians and Moldavians represent 20%; at Transcarpathia the proportion of Hungarians is 12,1%.

Nationality does not exactly reflect the linguistic situation, e.g. 15% (5,6 million persons) of those claimed to be Ukrainian nationals stated to have Russian as their mother tongue; and there was 4% (0,33 million) Russian nationals who claimed to be Ukrainian speakers. Members of small minorities also increase the proportion of Russian speakers within the total: e.g. a mere 20% of the Belorussians claimed to be Belorussian speakers, for 65,5% of them Russian is the mother tongue as is for 88,5% of Greeks and Jews too. It is about 30% of the inhabitants of Ukraine whose mother tongue is Russian. As a result of the Russification during the years between 1930 and 1980, Russian was the dominant official language and in many eastern and southern cities of Ukraine Russian is still the everyday language.

As to language competence, according to a 2007 survey Russian has been in a more favourable position because 95,8% of Russian and 74,5% of the Ukrainian nationals can easily express themselves in Russian both in speech and writing, while only 82,1 of the Ukrainians and 30,1 of the Russians are fluent in the Ukrainian language. There were only 1% of Ukrainians who claimed to know no Russian while 6% of Russians do not speak Ukrainian at all. 73,2% of the Russians use solely Russian at home and 15,5% prefer to do so; Of the Ukrainians 36,7% use solely and 10,7% mainly Ukrainian at home. 22,6% of the Ukrainians use at home a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, a variety differing from both literary languages and is scorned by standard speakers of both languages as substandard, *suržyk*.

All in all it means that every 7th Ukrainian uses exclusively or mainly Russian at home.

In modern times the strengthening of the position of the national language became the symbol of the Ukrainian struggle for independence. The first language law of 1989 –still in Soviet times - declared Ukrainian as the state language but it allowed the parallel use of the mother tongue for national and ethnic minorities living in closer communities. The most important features have been included into the Constitution of the independent Ukraine accepted in 1996 (Article 10) that declares that the state language of Ukraine is the Ukrainian language.

With the help of the state the sphere of the use of the Ukrainian language has considerably been widened especially in kindergarten and primary school education and in the function of state language in official and administrative spheres. The Soviet language policy has deformed the Ukrainian language itself thus it became necessary to revitalize it facilitated by the new atmosphere in favour of national developments. Thus the language maintenance gained importance. Following independence language maintenance has rocketed full speed. Already in 1990 there was an attempt at reconstructing orthography meddled with in 1933, e.g. <ɾ> has been reintroduced and reinforced by the 1993 orthographic regulations. The norms of the Ukrainian language have to strengthen against those of Russian and get reinforced especially in the consciousness of bilingual speakers.

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Minority politics and minorities rights

