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SCHOLAR RESEARCH BRIEF:

## Multilingualism and Language Policy in post-Soviet Ukraine: English, Ukrainian and Russian in Linguistic Landscapes

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This research examines language use in Linguistic Landscapes in a medium size city in post-Soviet southeastern Ukraine. Linguistic Landscapes represent various media, shop signs, advertisement posters, billboards, official and private notices, etc. They reflect the dynamics of political, economic and social transformations, and demonstrate a complex negotiation of competing and coexisting local, national and global discourses and ideologies. This investigation explores how multilingual texts of publicly displayed signs transform visual public spaces, and how these changes affect the local population's perception of language policy and language use.

## RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

The breakup of the USSR allowed each new post-Soviet state to determine its national language policy, which is a critical aspect of nation-building. This became especially important for Ukraine where processes of nation-building and national identity formation are being facilitated through elevation of the status and prestige of the Ukrainian language.

Historically, Ukraine is a multilingual country with two dominant languages, Ukrainian and Russian. The linguistic and ideological conflict around language policy and language use in Ukraine is conditioned by the historical asymmetrical distribution of the languages: Ukrainian is dominant in the west while Russian is dominant in the east and south of Ukraine (Khmelko & Wilson, 1998; Kuzio, 2000; Magosci, 1998).

The post-Soviet language policy made Ukrainian the only official language of the state. Such language policy has been implemented to promote nation-building and Ukrainian identity formation through Ukrainization and de-Russification. However, Russian received the status of a 'minority' language not in a sense of a numerical minority, but through official limitations for public use, including government, education, media, business, and courts (Pavlenko, 2008, 2009). With a newly elected government in 2010, the official language policy did not undergo changes relevant to the public domain of language use, and the current law on advertising favors Ukrainian as a national and official language. To the great disappointment of the supporters of a new government, Russian did not receive a status of an official language in par with Ukrainian. Thus a *de-facto* Ukrainian bilingualism is still not legitimized by the existing language policy.

Ukrainian and Russian are genetically close languages with a number of shared linguistic elements on multiple levels of representation and look identical or almost identical in both languages. This makes production and interpretation of the signs mutually intelligible for speakers of both, Ukrainian and Russian. Although both, Ukrainian and Russian, appear in visual linguistic spaces, the advertisers are aware of the language policy, and



The Ukrainian, Russian and English language share the public space.

prefer to use the words that are identical in their written form in Ukrainian and Russian.

The post-Soviet economic, social and political transformations in Ukraine have increased the role of English as a language of prestige, modernity, international communication, and economic and political integration (House, 2003; Kachru, 1997). English is now the most popular foreign language taught in schools and universities (Bilaniuk & Melnyk, 2008). English and Roman script are widely used in various signs, advertising, logos and product names. In many cases, English (and sometimes other European languages) is used in a central position of the text, while Ukrainian and Russian deliver additional information about the products and services. Thus, the use of Ukrainian or Russian is sensitive to the local, regional and national boundaries and regulations, while the appearance of English reinforces globalization.

The juxtaposition in public spaces of Ukrainian, Russian and English, and Cyrillic and Roman scripts, places Ukraine in a unique situation, with competing and coexisting linguistically reflected ideologies of globalization, national unity, nationalistic tendencies and local and regional fragmentation (Bever, 2010; Bilaniuk, 2005; Hornberger, 2003; Pavlenko, 2008, 2009).

## RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

This research is focused on Linguistic Landscapes as a manifestation of Ukrainian multilingualism as a local and national phenomenon, and the spread of the English and Roman script as a global phenomenon. Linguistic Landscapes display various instances of languages and script contact in the visual domain of language use including official and private signs, such as shop signs, advertising posters, billboards, etc. Analyses of the appearance of particular languages and scripts, and the local population's perception of the multilingual signs confirms that Ukraine continues to maintain its bilingualism on the individual and societal levels. The global spread of English creates a significant layer of 'commodified' linguistic and ideological properties. Thus, complexities of multilingual Linguistic Landscapes reveal an intersection of the local, national and global discourses and ideologies.

This research is focused on language use in the publicly displayed spaces in a medium size city of about 800,000 on the Dneiper River in the southeastern part of Ukraine. The city has been historically populated by ethnic Russians and Ukrainians with significant dominance of Russian speakers (Kuzio, 2000). This research is focused on analyses of languages and linguistic devices employed in construction of the signage. In addition it investigates the perception and interpretation of the multilingual signage by the local population.

The research surveyed local streets' signs and advertising, and discussed with local people about their understanding of them. The research methods include taking pictures as documents for my research. Even after 20 years of Ukrainian

Independence, Ukraine represents a politically and economically sensitive environment. I found a great deal of variability in the local population's responses. It is still the case that someone with a camera can create concern, even being questioned by the stores' security. The structured interviews on language policy and language use are considered to be a political issue by many, so my initially planned formal interviews turned into informal discussions about multilingual media and advertising. Although the language policy is confusing for the local population in general, they acknowledge and address Ukrainian as the state language (*derzhavna mova*) as oppose to Russian (*Ruskiy yazyk*), where *mova* and *yazyk* mean language in Ukrainian and Russian correspondently.

A primary goal of the research is to assess how Linguistic Landscapes negotiate the current state of linguistic and ideological tensions between the Ukrainian and Russian languages in the context of Ukrainian-only as the official language policy and the role of English in the context of competing local and national



This sign utilizes numbers, letters, and images, and the Roman and Cyrillic scripts. The text on the right is in Cyrillic, identical in Ukrainian and Russian and is a Cyrillic transliteration of the English internet phrase *online chat*.

language ideologies. My prior research showed that the publicly displayed signs indicate language preference in visual spaces from local, national and global perspectives (Bever, 2010).

The current research uses standard methods of analysis developed in the literature on Linguistic Landscapes (Gorter, 2006), and my own semiotic and linguistic methods, with significant additional analytic techniques of my own (Bever, 2010). The research involves ethnographic methods, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches. Primary data are photographs of signs taken in different parts of the city. The categories of signs include banks and financial institutions, stores and restaurants signs, advertising posters and billboards. The variability of different styles in designing the signs depends on category of establishment and creates a great range of types of signs. The signs represent multilayered constructions with different configurations of print and images: each sign must be first analyzed qualitatively on its own terms. This means that the logo, the name of the establishment, the information about the product and services, special events, etc. can use different languages. This is the point of negotiating the conflicting language ideologies in Ukraine: the appearance of a particular language depends on the nature of the establishment (governmental, financial, private), the origin of the product or the company (Russia, Ukraine or other countries) and in many cases on linguistic preferences of the owners of the small businesses. This then becomes the basis for quantitative summaries with respect to different kinds of features and categories of establishments. This includes

differentiation of various semiotic and linguistic devices employed in communicating messages in the signs.

The research shows that the English language and Roman script are widely used in universal brand names, product names, company names and in advertising websites across all of the categories of establishments. English is used in its original form on letters, lexical and phrase levels. The creators of the signs usually use parallel texts so that the signs which use the foreign language do not have a direct translation of the texts. Here the symbolic power of the universal brand names and English overlaps with their informational power: names like SONY or HONDA, COLGATE or NIVEA symbolize a foreign company, while informing the customer about the existence of its products on the local and national markets. In many cases English serves as an attention getter to attract the customer and the viewer. English also appears in a form of lexical creativities and transliterations into Cyrillic alphabet. The translation of English or other foreign texts appears in Ukrainian in home appliance



instructions (washer machines, TV sets) and in imported medicine descriptions.

From previous research data in 2008-2009, the appearance of the foreign languages in public domain was considered as a linguistic and ideological invasion. Some of my respondents at that time reported: "We live like we are abroad, like in a foreign country". My current data shows, that the local population has accommodated to the appearances of the foreign language and many lexical borrowings. However generational differences still exist: while the younger generation enjoys world-wide integration and participation in the global culture, the older generation is still seeking additional information and translation to the local languages.

A younger discussant: "Thank you for complimenting my English. English is everywhere now. I learned it through the computer games. They are awesome for learning English".

Older discussant: "The younger generation knows everything: Russian, Ukrainian, English, German... We do not care about the foreign words anymore. We see foreign language everywhere... But we look for what is in Russian and Ukrainian".

Thus, the perception and interpretation of the texts (written and spoken) are translated into everyday social and cultural practices which are conditioned by linguistic boundaries across generations. Depending on the age and the social status, different groups of the population negotiate their life style across and along the linguistically defined

boundaries. Ukrainian and Russian compete in public spaces with English and the Roman script, while negotiating their own status as an official and national language for Ukrainian and the preferred local language for Russian.

Private stores and private businesses continue using Russian alone or in combination with Ukrainian and English, while banks and financial companies use Ukrainian. The genetic closeness of Ukrainian and Russian allows advertisers in many cases to use identical linguistic forms to avoid conflicting language ideologies and to comply with the official language regulations. The identical or almost identical linguistic properties facilitate negotiation of the ongoing conflict of language use. Many common words like *bank, credit, restaurant, bar, deposit, contract, document, computer*, etc. are the lexical borrowings from other languages, and look identical in Ukrainian and Russian. Thus, Linguistic Landscapes in Ukraine undergo complex negotiation of local, national and global ideologies, with Russian, Ukrainian and English on display.

*"The younger generation knows everything: Russian, Ukrainian, English, German... We do not care about the foreign words anymore. We see foreign language everywhere... But we look for what is in Russian and Ukrainian."*

Senior interviewee

## CONTINUING RESEARCH

Language is an inalienable part of each person's identity. Language choice and language use are linked to the issues of language policy, individual and societal multilingualism, identity and ideology. Ukraine represents a unique case of language use with multiple layers of competing linguistic and ideological spaces along several dividing lines: local-regional-national-global, east-west, urban-rural, official-everyday language use, visual-spoken language.

In today's highly technological world of media and advertising, the social and cultural representations and interpretations of language are facilitated through different modes of representation (print, linguistic devices, images, color, font, moving visual effects, etc.). Dealing with the complexity of interconnected topics requires a broad research agenda. This research is part of a larger project, a longitudinal study of language use in Ukraine which would include but will not be limited to the following topics:

- Collection of data from areas outside of the downtown area to contrast the Linguistic Landscapes in the central shopping areas with other local neighborhood areas, where there may be more pressure to use Russian, or intensive use of English and other international signage.
- Analysis of selected websites of establishments as available. The research question is the extent to which the websites shift language emphasis, reflecting English and the Roman alphabet as the more common alphabet on the web, and greater globalization presence on the web.
- Analysis of the Linguistic Landscapes in rural areas. This will expand the data on the differentiation of urban and rural attitudes towards the language policy and language use.
- Analysis of advertising on TV and local media, where language is a part of larger multimodal construction of the message delivery.
- Conducting formal interviews with representatives of different spheres of community, including policy makers, public officials, and education administrators.
- Conducting a comparative analysis study by collecting data in different cities and regions to identify major strands of language use which would address strengths and weaknesses of the Ukrainian language policy and language planning.

## RELEVANCE TO POLICY COMMUNITY

Geopolitically, Ukraine is uniquely situated between Russia and the European Union. This makes Ukraine especially important to the dynamics of post-Soviet transformations and interactions with European states and the world community. The rapid changes in political, economic, and socio-cultural domains and nation-building are tightly linked to language policy and language planning. A better understanding of the local and national dynamics of the linguistic and ideological spaces of the use of the Ukrainian and Russian language should be of use to the American diplomats and the world business community.

Even 20 years after announcing Ukrainian independence, nation-building through Ukrainization and de-Russification is a topic for national debates and political polarization. Design and implementation of a balanced language policy which would facilitate linguistic needs of both eastern and western Ukraine should be included into the agenda of building true democracy in Ukraine. Addressing language policy nationally and internationally will bring better understanding of power relations and dynamics of Ukrainian politics. The major political parties are still associated with the Ukrainian or Russian-speaking population in national elections and are divided along geographical and corresponding linguistic lines: which language one supports can be an immediate identification of political ideology.

In the context of globalization and the spread of English, Ukraine reveals the multifaceted role of English as a language of globalization, progress and modernity. English is widely taught at schools and the universities, and is used in international trade, finance, advertising and marketing, science and technology. The visibility of English facilitates the public negotiation between Ukrainian and Russian and raises language awareness and positive attitudes towards multilingualism with respect to national and international agendas. The rich multilingual signage in Ukraine brings awareness of English and the US into every person's life. Thus, understanding how signs utilize English as a compromise between Ukrainian and Russian and as a global language aids understanding of how the local population comes to view both US democracy and US business practices.

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The Title VIII Program, administered by the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, provides funding for research and language training to American scholars and students for the study of Eastern Europe and Eurasia (Independent States of the Former Soviet Union). Title VIII maintains U.S. expertise in the regions and brings open source, policy-relevant research to the service of the U.S. Government.

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