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## Language legislation in the era of independence: sociolinguistic dimension

### Legislación lingüística en la era de la independencia: dimensión sociolingüística

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#### Abstract


The objective of the paper is to examine the sociolinguistic dimension of language legislation in Ukraine. The study focuses on the impact of the "language issue" on Ukrainian society in the context of war as well as to analyse linguistic representations, ideologies, and attitudes and their impact on the linguistic behaviour of Ukrainians. A resource for activating interpersonal solidarity and resistance to the enemy, and for modulating the manifestation of individual positions in macrosociological and political relations that may arise in the process of interaction. With the help of a critical approach to the theoretical guidelines of the study the role of language legislation in shaping language policy and regulating the use of languages in various spheres of life is analysed. The issues of linguistic equality, diglossia, and language policy in relation to minority languages are considered. The most important issue of the paper is that the language legislation of the independence era in Ukraine is of great importance for the sociolinguistic development of society. In times of war, it affects language processes, language policy, and the total transition to the state language.


#### Resumen


El objetivo del artículo es examinar la dimensión sociolingüística de la legislación lingüística en Ucrania. El estudio se centra en el impacto de la "cuestión lingüística" en la sociedad ucraniana en el contexto de la guerra, así como en analizar las representaciones, ideologías y actitudes lingüísticas y su repercusión en el comportamiento lingüístico de los ucranianos. Un recurso para activar la solidaridad interpersonal y la resistencia al enemigo, y para modular la manifestación de las posiciones individuales en las relaciones macrosociológicas y políticas que puedan surgir en el proceso de interacción. Con la ayuda de un enfoque crítico de las directrices teóricas del estudio se analiza el papel de la legislación lingüística en la configuración de la política lingüística y en la regulación del uso de las lenguas en diversos ámbitos de la vida. Se consideran las cuestiones de la igualdad lingüística, la diglosia y la política lingüística en relación con las lenguas minoritarias. La cuestión más importante del artículo es que la legislación lingüística de la época de la independencia en Ucrania es de gran importancia para el desarrollo sociolingüístico de la sociedad. En tiempos de guerra, afecta a los procesos lingüísticos,


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Excluding the language of the enemy, however, does not mean levelling all languages. It is important to strike a balance between protecting the language rights of citizens and preserving linguistic diversity in the country.

**Keywords:** language processes, minority languages, diglossia, language equality, sociolinguistic representations, and ideologies.

## Introduction

The importance of language policies in the post-independence period is undeniable. Scientists highlight the significance of language in shaping national identity, fostering social cohesion, and promoting linguistic diversity. It is important mentioning the challenges and debates surrounding language legislation, such as the tension between promoting the official language and protecting minority languages. Additionally, the paper outlines the objectives and structure of language legislation. In the context of multinationality, political crises, and war, the concepts of language and identity, as is often the case in times of instability, significantly change the perception of citizens. In the context of the war in Ukraine, the choice of language code has become a particularly important topic related to identity and political position. Language preferences are linked to the understanding of the “Ukrainian nation” and the desire to position oneself as a patriot. Under such conditions, the choice of code becomes a form of political expression and statements about one’s identity.

Language boundary and language territory are concepts that are addressed by sociolinguistics, geolinguistics, and geography of languages

a la política lingüística y a la transición total a la lengua estatal. Sin embargo, excluir la lengua del enemigo no significa nivelar todas las lenguas. Es importante encontrar un equilibrio entre la protección de los derechos lingüísticos de los ciudadanos y la preservación de la diversidad lingüística del país.

**Palabras clave:** procesos lingüísticos, lenguas minoritarias, diglosia, igualdad lingüística, representaciones sociolingüísticas e ideologías.

(Chapman, 2022). Linguistic territoriality as a principle is subject to the procedures for applying language legislation. The choice of preserving this principle and its consequences is also the subject of sociolinguistic approaches both to understand the causes and to observe and analyse the effects of language legislation (Shevchuk, 2021). The language territory, since the language border is one of the most obvious realities of the language space, is understood as a macro concept (Filipova, Iliev & Yuleva-Chuchulayn, 2021). The purpose of the present work in this context is to try a global sociolinguistic approach to the spatial dimension of languages. Language space as a macro-concept is hierarchically placed above the linguistic territory and its variants and sub-variants, so that language can be a pluriterritorial or complex geolinguistic entity with variable external boundaries, source, and exist outside the linguistic territory. The sociolinguistic dimension of compliance with the language legislation of the state includes the analysis of social and linguistic aspects of this process. The main aspects that can be taken into account include: geopolitical causes and social consequences, language changes, language competence, and cultural identity (Table 1):

**Table 1.**

*The sociolinguistic dimension of compliance with the language legislation of the state*

Geopolitical causes and social consequences	The introduction of the Ukrainian language at the legislative level has a major, positive impact on social dynamics. This includes changes in the education system, public administration, business, and other areas of life.
Language changes	Changes in language practices and norms. This includes the development of new language policies, the creation of new dictionaries, and the expansion of vocabulary.
Language competence	The transition to the Ukrainian language at the legislative level meant the development of language competence among the population. This means that people should have a sufficient level of skills to use the Ukrainian language in various spheres of life
Cultural identity	The transition to the Ukrainian language has had an impact on the cultural identity of the population. This has led to positive changes in perception and a sense of patriotism.

Source: author's own development.

It is important to take into account the social consequences of the transition to the Ukrainian language in the post-independence era. This process has ensured successful integration and maintaining social balance. Understanding language change and its impact on communication is important for successful transition to Ukrainian and developing language competence is important to ensure effective communication and promote linguistic integration.

### **Theoretical Framework or Literature Review**

Scientific thought separates language as a human capacity for communication and language as a homogeneous and recognisable phenomenon, in the sense of “speech”, as an individual production of language (Jaspers, 2023). This division within the human capacity to communicate has subsequently become a point of disagreement among linguists. General linguistics is often criticised for being ahistorical, asocial, autonomous, and formalistic, for focusing on units of language rather than the full picture created by discourse participants, and for neglecting communicative heterogeneity (Stich, 2020).

In this context, it should be noted that language is social in nature, exists in society, and changes over time (Saussure & De Mauro, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to see the connections between linguistics and other social sciences. European scholarship links language to the social, refusing to ignore the social, political, and economic forces that influence linguistics. If language is a social fact, as Saussure argued, then linguistics must deal with these external factors and hence become sociolinguistics (De Saussure & Wharton, 2020). Thus, sociolinguistics is linguistics that encompasses everything that has to do with language and its real life (Holmes & Wilson, 2022). Linguists should not explain linguistic facts by other linguistic facts but explain linguistic phenomena based on external data taken from the real world and social behaviour (Tiv, Kutlu, O'Regan & Titone, 2022). Thus, sociolinguistics is a broad field that intersects with social psychology, sociology, and anthropology in the study of ethnic groups, collective and individual identities, social representations, and attitudes towards certain forms of language (García, 2022).

Thus, language should be understood from a sociolinguistic perspective, in accordance with linguistic development and the understanding of the concept of linguistic territory.

Scholars postulate in this context that the infinite space of languages is also manifested through their movements, their dynamics, the transition from coverage to other types of organisation, such as a border, for example, suggesting a sequence of dividing lines or vectors (Siregar, 2022). One of the main criteria for distinguishing between space and territory, which is preserved in the sociolinguistic approach, is the presence or absence of encompassing delineations (Kusters & Lucas, 2022), which have been used to denote different patterns of elementary spatial structures.

The consequences of language entrenchment (legislation), old or recent territorial spillovers of languages, as well as new structuring of their spatialisation have a particular impact on their constituent elements and sociolinguistic profiles. At the very least, these effects contribute to the characterisation of contexts of linguistic standardisation, as is the case, for example, in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Starting from a linguistic space that is not clearly or stably demarcated, this space undergoes, over time and under the influence of various factors due to human intervention, the emergence, and development of various choreographic representations that arise in areas of interaction with other languages, especially at the political and administrative level (Rodríguez-Ordoñez, Kasstan & O'Rourke, 2022). The image of a linguistic territory is certainly relativised, but the latter appears as a paradigmatic result of delineations that structure and divide linguistic space (Kumar, 2021). Blurred and original linguistic spaces without territory and linguistic territories of original communities constitute the two historical poles. However, depending on the era, configurations have favoured tendencies to delimit linguistic space in connection with, for example, the development of nation-states, or conversely, communication areas marked by functions other than political and administrative systems, or in particular, religion, culture, or economy.

### **Methodology**

The paper outlines the philosophical and epistemological framework of critical sociolinguistics within the framework of the language legislation of Ukraine. The paper uses a critical approach to the theoretical guidelines of the study. Based on the analysis of related studies, the linguistic ideologies of the research group are compared.

To analyse the sociolinguistic dimension of the language legislation of the era of Ukraine's independence, the qualitative approach was chosen as a method of data collection. In addition, interviews were used as a more personalised and effective method.

The research questions included four main topics:

- 1) The impact of the war on participants' perceptions and attitudes and, consequently, on their language practices;
- 2) The influence of identity and economic factors (pride and profit) on language behaviour;
- 3) Intergroup relations, "otherness" and the potential for conflict based on language differences;
- 4) Changes in attitudes and language choice in the wake of war.

The detailed questions corresponding to these four main blocks are presented below:

- What are the sociolinguistic representations (attitudes) of different ideological groups of Russian-speaking Ukrainians after the attack by Russia?
- How are they expressed in actual language practices, for example, "auto-Ukrainisation"/ "self-Ukrainisation"?
- What is the connection between the first and second concepts, and are there any differences between them (e.g., "I hate Russian, but I speak it anyway")?
- Can we talk about language changes under the influence of ideologies, and in what way?
- How do they transform into processes of "language maintenance and change"?
- How do the discourses of "pride and patriotism" influence the linguistic and identification choices of speakers?

- How are relations between ideological groups linguistically manifested?
- How do linguistic relations between ideological groups influence the language choice of speakers?
- How did the language attitudes and practices and relations between the groups change during the interviews?

Each interview began with a casual exchange between the researcher and the participant, focusing on the participant's family, professional and social background, as well as related language practices.

This was followed by interview questions. Based on the research questions, four more sets of questions are presented about:

- 1) Language skills, including foreign languages;
- 2) Attitudes towards Russian, Ukrainian, and language change, especially in times of war;
- 3) Prestige and market value of languages;
- 4) Languages spoken and studied in the regions of the participants.

There were no direct questions about the relationship between opposing ideological groups, but the participants themselves began to talk about "others" who think differently and why they are wrong. Thus, it was possible to observe an internal dialogue with imaginary opponents.

**Results and Discussion**

The sociolinguistic dimension of language legislation in Ukraine can be illustrated by examples of specific laws and their impact on society. Here are some examples (Table 2):

**Table 2.**  
*Laws of Ukraine and their regulatory impact on society*

The Law of Ukraine "On Languages in Ukraine"	This law was adopted to ensure equal use of the Ukrainian language as the state language. It stipulates that the Ukrainian language is mandatory for official communication in all spheres of life, including government institutions, education, media, and others. This law has a sociolinguistic dimension, as it affects language policy, multilingualism, and linguistic identity of citizens.
Law of Ukraine "On National Minorities in Ukraine"	This law recognises the rights of national minorities to preserve, develop and use their language and culture. It stipulates that national minorities have the right to education, media, and other services in their mother tongue. This law also has a sociolinguistic dimension, as it affects multilingualism, linguistic equality, and social inclusion.
Law of Ukraine "On Regional and Minority Languages in Ukraine"	This law provides for the protection and support of regional and minority languages. It recognises the right of citizens to use regional and minority languages in public life, education, media, and other areas. The law also has a sociolinguistic dimension, as it promotes the preservation of linguistic diversity and the development of bilingual communities.

Source: Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2023)

Even in the context of war, it is, unfortunately, necessary to emphasise the fact that Eastern Ukraine is not homogeneous, but rather a territory with a wide variety of sociolinguistic and political representations, which was the catalyst for the enemy's treacherous invasion. However, when studying the linguistic situation during these tragic social changes, the situation has changed dramatically (Buriak, Skaletska, Rezvorovych & Gigin, 2023).

The present study reflects the new view of Ukrainian society on language legislation. This diversity of viewpoints, perceptions, and attitudes was made possible by involving a sample of different ideological groups.

The study of related literature has become a source of information for comparing linguistic behaviour in Ukraine during the war (Onuch, Hale & Sasse, 2018).

Volodymyr Kulyk distinguishes three competing ideologies among Ukrainian political and intellectual groups in Ukraine that claim to represent the interests of the respective ideology of the Ukrainian population, namely: "Ukrainian-speaking", "Russian-speaking" and "centrist" (Kulyk, 2018).

First of all, the Ukrainian-speaking ideology corresponds to the monolingual discourse of the nation-state, which promotes the Ukrainian language and perceives Russian as the language of the enemy, which can be used as a cultural weapon against the Ukrainian state (Shutenko, 2022).

Secondly, the Russian-language discourse leans towards protecting the rights of Ukrainian Russian-speaking citizens, demanding that Russian be granted official status alongside Ukrainian.

Finally, the centrists see their position as non-ideological and rational, claiming to defend the interests of the entire cultural and ethnic diversity of Ukraine.

They believe that Ukrainian is the only official language, which is symbolic for Ukraine, but at the same time, they advocate for the recognition of national minority languages.

The Ukrainian-American linguistic anthropologist Lada Bilaniuk (2022) distinguishes two opposing trends in Ukrainian language ideologies and practices, which she calls "Language does not matter" (those who

defend their right to speak the language they like, because language is not important for nation-building) and "language matters" (those who emphasise the importance of Ukrainian for national unity and victory over the enemy and try to speak Ukrainian), based, again, on civic and ethnocultural interpretations of the nation, respectively. It also points to the need to investigate the tendency of self-Ukrainisation in the case of the second ideology, which was one of the goals of this study (Bilaniuk, 2022).

However, it should be noted that a radical trend has developed among ideological "Russian speakers", especially in the east and south of the country, who identified themselves with Russia, which also affected their language practices and in the context of war they are without hesitation considered traitors and this category was not even considered as a candidate for the study.

Based on the above studies, the sample was divided into two ideological groups.

The number of participants and their representativeness are debatable concepts that are themselves influenced by ideologies. In general, various works on research methods in the social sciences note that it is impossible to be sure that the characteristics of all participants are well represented by the sample, even in the case of a census (Pratt, 2023). Moreover, a large sample is not suitable for qualitative research because it does not allow for deeper observations (Khoa, Hung & Hejsalem-Brahmi, 2023). A sample size is sufficient if the researcher deems it to be so based on the research objectives, general limitations, and time constraints (Kelly, 2023).

The sample for this study consisted of 32 IDPs, 16 men, and 16 women, of different ages, socio-professional categories, and occupations, belonging to a continuum of opinions between two ideological groups that will be presented later. The aim was to interview about 10 people in each group, the exact number of participants depended on their availability.

The number of participants depended on the availability of those willing to take part in the survey. The selection method was applied to ensure that the participants adhered to the widest possible range of ideological continuum in their views. These participants were those who have typical linguistic behaviour for this ideological group, which can potentially be generalised to measure linguistic changes in this area.



The study was anonymous, but the categories of age, occupation, and level of education were used to analyse the factors influencing the choice of code. Ethnicity was not considered as a relevant variable, as previous research (Averianova & Voropaieva, 2020) has shown that regional identity is much more important and influential for Ukrainians. For eastern Ukrainians, regional identity is much more important and influential than ethnic identity, especially for the younger generation of Ukrainians who do not remember what ethnic identity is, a generation of Ukrainians who do not remember the Soviet practice of dividing the population along ethnic lines (Gnatiuk & Melnychuk, 2019).

This survey confirmed this assumption: The survey did not ask directly about ethnicity, but among them, people over 40 years old mentioned it as a factor because of or in spite of which they chose a particular language (e.g., “I am ethnically Russian, but I like to speak Ukrainian” or “I am ethnically Ukrainian, but I speak Russian because this is a region close to Russia”), which indicates that ethnicity may not always be a factor in language choice. This suggests that ethnicity can be perceived differently by participants and therefore does not follow the logic: “ethnic Russian = Russian language” or “ethnic Ukrainian = Ukrainian language”.

The younger participants did not mention their ethnicity at all, indicating only the geographical regions where they were born or live.

In an attempt to open the field to a wide range of opinions, participants were selected for the study and divided into two ideological groups. Since the main point of polarisation among the participants was the political choice of language legislation, which was reflected in their language ideologies, the participants were divided into two groups – “pro-Ukrainian” and “Ukrainianised”. Representatives of the first group tend to have a strong national identity but differ in their interpretation of the national idea at the sociolinguistic level. Supporters of ethnocultural nationalism, which we call “Language matters” in this paper, welcome the official Ukrainian orientation of the Ukrainian state, attaching importance to language for the consolidation of the state. This subgroup advocates for the Ukrainian language at all levels and tries to use it in their everyday language practices.

The second subgroup of Russian-speaking pro-Ukrainians, tentatively called “Language does not matter”, shares the zeal of the previous group but believes that the nation should be united by

political rather than linguistic ideology, but has shifted its focus to the Ukrainian language due to the war. Their views range from recognising Ukrainian as the only state language, but accepting any language in personal communication (avoiding the language of the enemy), but not levelling the languages of other nationalities in Ukraine.

In the most radical cases (one participant) refused to identify himself as a Ukrainian, but did not reject the Ukrainian language and considered eastern Ukraine to be part of Ukraine.

It should be noted that although this paper uses two separate ideological groups to categorise participants, in practice these ideologies represent a continuum of opinion rather than clearly defined entities that were taken into account during data collection and analysis.

To recap, the research corpus consisted of observations of participants prior to the interviews, their behaviour at the meetings, transcripts of the recorded interviews, their behaviour on social media, their choice of language for consent forms and interviews, their choice of pseudonyms, their reactions to the debriefing, and informal off-the-record behaviour described in the research diary. Taken together, these data formed part of a complete picture that was consistently built into a narrative, taking into account the overall experience of data collection.

A limitation of this paper is the interpretation of the data. The interpretation of the data could be influenced by the author's own political beliefs and human subjectivity.

A holistic thematic approach was used to interpret the data, which was facilitated by predefined blocks of questions followed by a detailed analysis of recurring subthemes. This analysis followed the classical method of data interpretation, which consisted of four steps:

- 1) Coding the data using keywords or phrases;
- 2) Grouping these words into broader themes;
- 3) Building arguments;
- 4) Collecting data extracts to support the argument.

To measure linguistic practices and behaviour, the sources of variation underlying language use proposed by Fishman (2020) and Grosjean (1998) are combined, which can be summarised as skills (written production and comprehension, oral production and comprehension), role relations between speakers, situations (formal,

conversational, intimate) and domains of language behaviour (topics of conversation, places of communication, sociocultural patterns, etc.).

Russian speakers of the “language does not matter” ideology view different national, regional, and political groups as endo- and exogroups. For radical pro-Ukrainian participants, all nationalities of Ukraine are Ukrainians, and Ukrainians, Europeans/Americans, and like-minded people are “their own”.

For Russian-speaking pro-Ukrainians, the latter are “others”, while Russians from Russia and Ukrainians from their region who have taken the position of the enemy and were once “their own” are seen as outsiders. This categorisation does not depend on language legislation but is an individual sociolinguistic belief that affects the social and linguistic representations of these people and influences their practices of bilingual adaptation.

Ideological differences and self-identification with opposing national and regional groups influence language choice in wartime. All participants reported having difficulties with Western Ukrainian. On the other hand, pro-Ukrainian Russian speakers expressed the most positive attitude towards this variety of Ukrainian. For most Ukrainophiles, “normal” Ukrainian is Kyivan, while for Russian-speaking participants, “pure Ukrainian” is the language spoken in Poltava, which many experts in Ukrainian sociolinguistics would consider “Surzhyk”. The Russian-speaking pro-Ukrainian group considered Russian to be the standard language before the war; by the time of the interview, their opinion had radically changed towards a categorical rejection of this language. The Ukrainian-speaking pro-Ukrainian group considers linguistic differences between the two varieties desirable for distinguishing Russian-speaking Ukrainians from Russians. But at the same time, popular Russian accents are condemned as “ugly” and as “the language of the enemy”.

In addition, linguistic ideologies and norms influence the classification of language practices as “natural” or “artificial”.

Although the transition to Ukrainian at the level of legislation was fulfilled by all participants, and considered “natural” by Ukrainian-speaking pro-Ukrainian participants, the use of Ukrainian in all spheres of everyday life is still problematic for

some Russian-speaking pro-Ukrainian representatives, and they consider this practice somewhat “artificial” for everyday contexts.

This leads to a “compartmentalisation” of language use in this group, which is typical for digitalised participants in a diglossic situation. The participants often changed the code according to their understanding of what is “natural” in each particular situation.

In addition, the understanding of the concepts of “mother tongue” and “foreign language” still depended more on the participants’ political position, their belonging to a particular national and political group, and their vision of the role of language(s) in the state.

Thus, “Ukrainian mother tongue” is the language of national identification and political position of the Ukrainian-speaking pro-Ukrainian group. For the Russian-speaking pro-Ukrainian group, so far, it is only the language of linguistic competence, which they are methodically developing in order to fully switch to the “native language” and abandon the language of the enemy and aggressor.

## Conclusions

The paper outlines the sociolinguistic dimension of language legislation and its impact on the language ideology of Ukrainian society. The results of the study reveal the impact of the “language issue” on Ukrainian society in times of war. In the context of multinationality, political crises, and war, the concept of language and identity has changed dramatically, even among Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Due to the war in Ukraine, the choice of language code has become a matter of principle. Such linguistic preferences are related to the understanding of the “Ukrainian nation”, the desire to position oneself as a patriot, and the eradication of the enemy language. The results of the study showed that ethnicity is not always a factor in the choice of language. Supporters of ethnocultural nationalism, which we call “Language matters” in this paper, welcome the official Ukrainian orientation of the Ukrainian state, attaching importance to language for the consolidation of the state. This subgroup advocates for the Ukrainian language at all levels and tries to use it in their everyday language practices. However, the results of the language ideology of the second group show that language categorisation does not depend on language legislation, but is an individual sociolinguistic belief, influencing the social and

linguistic representations of these people and affecting their bilingual adaptation practices.

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