

# Discourses on Languages and Identities in Readers' Comments in Ukrainian Online News Media: An Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory Perspective

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**Abstract:** This study is a pioneering attempt to apply social and ethnolinguistic identity theories developed by social psychologists Henri Tajfel, Howard Giles, and Patricia Johnson, and Judith Butler's critical feminist theory of hate speech, to Ukrainian realities. The material comprises nearly 3,000 readers' comments concerning language issues posted to Ukraine's leading news website *Ukrains'ka pravda (Ukrainian Truth)* in 2010-12, and is analyzed through a systematic discourse-historical approach within a critical discourse analysis. Notorious for intolerance, filthy language, and trolling on a mass scale, the comments reflected the language situation in Ukraine from 2010 to 2012, demonstrating linguistic optimism, linguistic alarmism, denial of bilingualism, and historicist, legalist, and laissez-fair discourses. The readers' comments deny or affirm the authenticity of either the Russian or the Ukrainian language, propose the exclusion or inclusion of the Russophone population in Ukraine, or deny that there are identity differences. From the chosen theoretical perspective, this study testifies to an unequal power status of the language groups, to the cultural hegemony of Russophones and the challenge to this hegemony by Ukrainophones, to mutual othering, and to an abundance of hate speech. Arguably, the use of hate speech assisted in developing and cementing the identities of Ukrainians who connected strongly with either the Ukrainian or the Russian language.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** social and ethnolinguistic identity theory, hate speech, media participation, readers' comments, Ukrainian, Russian.

**W**hen an artificial intelligence chatbot was released by Microsoft in March 2016 to learn human conversation patterns through

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<sup>1</sup> This article was inspired by Uwe Hasebrink and conceived during a series of seminars with him at the University of Hamburg, which I greatly appreciated. The text has also benefitted tremendously from detailed and profound comments by the editors, most prominently Volodymyr Kulyk, and from insightful feedback from my colleagues at Södertörn University, primarily Liudmila Voronova and Michael Forsman. I am indebted and deeply grateful to them as well as to both anonymous reviewers. All mistakes and shortcomings are mine.

mimicking Twitter users, it took less than a day for it to start reproducing racist rants (“Tay, Microsoft’s”). This came as no surprise to those who are familiar with online communicative practices, from social media to readers’ comments on news websites. With the ever increasing scope of online communication, the greater connectivity and participation may be conducive to solving social issues from the bottom up; new media are thus often seen as democracy’s and the public sphere’s paradise found. In particular, the prominent role of social media during Euromaidan followed the pattern established by the Arab Spring, that is, to be proclaimed “a new media revolution” (Zaliznyak 180; cf. Onuch). However, new media also entails a dark incarnation—a hotbed of othering, xenophobic discourses, and hate speech. I have tried to find out, through the means of critical discourse analysis, how the ethnolinguistic identities in Ukraine between its two latest revolutions in 2004 and 2014 were reflected and enacted in communication within the readers’ comments section at one of the largest and most important Ukrainian news websites *Ukrains'ka pravda* (*Ukrainian Truth*). I believe that such focus not only contributes to the knowledge of informal online settings and their democratic potential, but also explains some aspects of the way identities function in post-Soviet Eastern Europe.

The results presented here suggest that discourses on language in Ukraine during the presidency of Viktor Ianukovych testified to the unequal power statuses of Ukrainian and Russian languages. Regardless of their political and national sympathies, commenters viewed Russian as being in a hegemonic position and the linguistic vitality of Ukrainian was perceived as being eroded. Nevertheless, the failure of the participatory media ideal and prevalence of hate speech served to strengthen and consolidate ethnolinguistic identities, which in itself contains a democratic opportunity for the future by creating prerequisites for a more inclusive dialogue.

#### IDENTITIES AT PEACE AND AT WAR: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of social identity, one of the classical models in social psychology, was formulated in the 1970s by the British sociologist Henri Tajfel. In his view, an individual tends to stay with and within a group if “he derives some satisfaction from it”; unless it is physically impossible, he will tend to leave the group if it conflicts with “his acceptable self-image” (Tajfel 64). If leaving the group is not possible, dissatisfied group members will either change their perceptions, recasting their stigma as an advantage, or take part in social action to improve the group’s status. Importantly, “no group lives alone;” that is, the perception of a group’s

status is formed by comparing the group with surrounding groups (Tajfel 64).

Howard Giles (see Giles and Johnson; Reid et al.) was inspired by Tajfel's social identity concept to develop an offshoot theory of ethnolinguistic identity. Giles's theory contends that "the actions of individual group members are likely to be governed less by the actual vitality of their groups than by their perceptions of it" (Giles and Johnson 72). If they perceive this vitality to be low and the social identity unattractive, group members will be social mobility-oriented, but if group boundaries are hard to penetrate, they will avoid direct confrontation and try to "rebrand" their identity to one more attractive. However, if the group's low status is perceived to be illegitimate and the situation is unstable, social conflict will ensue (see Reid et al.). This theory has been used to describe and predict ingroup/outgroup behaviour in situations of asymmetric bilingualism and diglossia, such as Wales (Giles and Johnson), Puerto Rico (Clachar), Canada and Finland (Vincze and Freynet), which makes it interesting to apply to the Ukrainian situation. From the perspective of the social identity theory, I have tried to trace ethnolinguistic perceptions in informal discourses, with implications for the ingroup/outgroup dynamic.

Discussions of language are often hot-tempered and anonymous and online comments are prone to verbal abuse; therefore, it seems productive to interpret the problem of ethnolinguistic identity constructions in Web-based communication also through the lens of the hate speech theory developed by Judith Butler. From this perspective, hate speech is directly related to the formation of subject. One of the most radical ways in which a subject can be constituted is through hate speech that delineates it by inscribing it with difference. In John L. Austin's theory of performativity, statements (locutions), their intended effect in reality (illocutionary force), and the actual effect on the interlocutor (perlocutionary effect) can well diverge, so the effect of hate speech is often that of reinvigorating the identity of the hated subject. This is why Butler sees hate speech as rather constructive for the formation of the subject and suggests that censorship of hate speech is unnecessary in many cases (*Excitable Speech*). From Butler's feminist perspective, it is also crucial that gendering is inscribed in the formation of the subject that can never be constituted outside gender and sexual identity. This point appears to be relevant to the sexualized hate speech in the comments considered below.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This differs from most perspectives in the professional media community where hate speech in readers' comments is deemed unacceptable and subject to censorship. The question is, how can censorship be realistically enforced.

## USERS AND SPEAKERS: CLEARING THE FIELD

The problem of identity discourses in an informal mediated environment and in communication that is at once interpersonal and public situates this study at the borderline of two fields: studies of identities and studies of media user interactivity.

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies and social media led to a dramatic rise in connectivity and interactivity. From the very outset of the computer era in the late 1980s, virtual communities have been questioned on the grounds of whether their intangible, ephemeral nature makes them comparable to more conventional groupings of people, and in regard to the danger, imagined or real, in offering anonymity and stimulating aggressive behaviour “in the dark” (McLaughlin et al. 102). Consequently, the problem of “incivility” has become a major issue in this emergent field (Santana; Coe et al.). Many researchers have studied the impact of the digital technological revolution on democracy, public engagement, and public debates. While some (e.g., Baym; Bentivegna; Dahlgren; Castells) see social media optimistically as a networked public sphere gone online, others see it as a hindrance to democratic potential (e.g., Morozov), and still others seek a more weighted balance of advantages and shortcomings (e.g., Downing; Carpentier; Bakardjieva).

Newspapers started establishing an online presence in 1995, yet it took nearly a decade for academia to pay attention to this phenomenon. Imfeld and Scott as well as Paskin carried out exploratory quantitative studies establishing the rise of comment threads in the media and mapping the presence of democratic and abusive tendencies in these threads, while van Zoonen and others dealt with comments and video responses on YouTube. Most such studies are bound to specific national contexts: potential for positive interaction and participation in the British local newspapers’ comment sections was found by Canter, while Ruiz and others remained skeptical about democratic and pluralistic tendencies in the Catalan press reader debates. Some researchers focused on specific topics in readers’ comments, such as corporate social responsibility (Cho and Hong) and climate change (Koteyko et al.), while others studied the impact of the comments on other readers’ perceptions of news (Lee).

This article presents a study of a specific problem—ethnolinguistic identity constructions—in a specific national context of social media user interactivity. In 2013 Kulyk noted that the Internet and social media in Ukraine had become “a particularly suitable medium for preoccupation with memory and other aspects of identity” (“War of Memories,” 74). The heated discussions and clashing national memories were found in different national versions of Wikipedia (Kaprāns), and Web battles

between “Runet and Ukrnet” have also been noted, particularly around Crimea (Pasholok). Another pioneering work about Ukrainian Internet discourses on language is Michael Moser’s 2015 chapter that analyzed a variety of online material—including posts from Internet forums—that revealed a presence of hate speech in discourses about the Galician subdialect of Ukrainian (“Colonial”). As Moser found, many authors chose to decouple the Galician subdialect of Ukrainian from standard Ukrainian and construct it as an artificial “Galician language” before tying it again to standard Ukrainian and endowing the entire language with this new feature of “artificiality.” Kulyk (“Negotiating Memory”) observed that, due to freedom from state and economic pressures, social media became important arenas for debating historical memory in the early 2010s. In another early study of new media use in Ukraine, Orlova and Taradai noted the use of Facebook by journalists as an alternative public space. Except these few sources, there has been a lack of academic research into social media and user interactivity in Ukraine.

The construction of identities around language, however, is relatively well studied. Since 1991 Ukrainian society has been divided by conflicting historical memories of social and ethnolinguistic groups, with the collective identity threatened by the cultural heterogeneity of the titular majority of Ukrainians (cf. Wolczuk). Language and the culture it represents are key building blocks of these identities, while the situation of Ukraine is characterized by asymmetrical bilingualism (Masenko, “Language Situation”). Personal identity is strongly influenced by the dominant language of family interaction and school instruction, but also by class, age, and education level (Shumarova). Identity can be further complicated by mixing languages, code-switching and non-accommodating exchanges (Bilaniuk & Melnyk), and the existence of *surzhyk*—a sociolect widely spoken in Ukraine that mixes Ukrainian and Russian language elements in a highly individual and variable manner—which gave rise to a “culture of linguistic correction” (Bilaniuk). This situation has profound roots in Soviet and pre-Soviet linguistic realities and policies, as outlined in George Shevelov’s seminal essay on Ukrainian sociolinguistics (“The Language”). Of similar Soviet legacy is the use of laughter to subordinate the Ukrainian language in a bilingual situation, as noted by Masenko (“Smikhova kul'tura”).

Mykola Ryabchuk (*Vid Ukrainy; Dvi Ukrainy*) tried to explain this complex situation by arguing in his theory of “two Ukraines” and the “creolization” of Ukrainian autochthones that the assimilation of a significant part of Ukrainians by the privileged Russian minority resulted in power structures similar to those in Latin-American creole cultures. Russophones have effectively resisted linguistic assimilation in Central and Eastern Ukraine at least in part thanks to their position as a

privileged minority (Fournier). Meanwhile, public discourse has used the topos of “common sense” to avoid the social instability rooted in the language conflict, which served to preserve bilingualism and brake the remodelling of Ukraine as a nation state (Kulyk, “Constructing”). Moreover, bilingualism is a comfortable excuse for Russophones to remain unilingual (Kulyk, “Language Policy”). In fact, Bilaniuk and Melnyk believe that it is official status and legislative regulation, although imperfect, that helped boost the status and use of Ukrainian. Other Ukrainian sociolinguists, however, found the language policy under President Iushchenko contradictory and strategically exploitative in terms of the stated objectives versus the real outcomes (Shevchuk and Trach). Under the Ianukovych presidency, the pro-Russian government attacked this partial priority of Ukrainian (Moser, *Language*). At the same time, opinion polls demonstrated that support for the only official language (Ukrainian) increased from 35 to nearly 44 percent between 2005 and 2012 while support for bilingualism fell from 37 to nearly 24 percent, suggesting that Ianukovych’s policy backfired (“Iakym chynom”). In 2013, poll respondents were more positive to being addressed in Ukrainian (37.8 percent) compared to Russian (15.4 percent; “Shcho vy vidchuvaiete”). Since 2014 the language situation in Ukraine has been characterized by further “normalization” of bilingualism, which is often perceived as a foundation of the Ukrainian identity in its own right (Nedashkivska).

#### STUDY TOOL KIT: AIMS, METHODS, MATERIAL, AND LIMITATIONS

The main objective of this research is to investigate how different ethnolinguistic identities were constructed in informal public online communication on the eve of the Euromaidan protests. From the ethnolinguistic identity theory perspective, I compared the self-perceptions of Ukrainophones and Russophones in Ukraine at a key moment in the debate of Ianukovych’s controversial language policy. I examined the linguistic situation in Ukraine, as reflected in readers’ comments on Ukraine’s number one news website *Ukrains'ka pravda*, where people from all walks of life can express their views anonymously and with few constraints.

Given the aim, the material, and the theoretical horizon, these objectives are best studied with critical discourse analysis (CDA) that “deal[s] with the relationship between discourse and power” and is especially suitable for a non-quantitative study of unequal power statuses (van Dijk 363).

The initial research procedure was a close hermeneutic reading and

coding of all sampled comments (see the sampling procedure below). This was carried out with the help of thematic coding that Jensen called “a loosely inductive categorization . . . with reference to various concepts, headings, or themes,” thus forming the basis for CDA as “a combination of coding, primarily for heuristic purposes, with in-depth linguistic analysis of selected meaning elements” (247; 251).

I based this research on the experience of a specific school within CDA called “the discourse-historical approach” (DHA), which was first proposed in a seminal study on national identity by Wodak and others. The DHA consists of a thematic analysis and an in-depth level of analysis that are linked to analyses of argumentation strategies called *topoi* as well as material in the foreground and background of the text. As noted by Krzyżanowski, the analysis is carried out

by way of inductive analysis, i.e. by means of decoding the meaning of text passages—usually taking place via several thorough readings—and then ordering them into lists of key themes and sub-themes. It is important to note that the analysis here concerns discourse (and not text) topics, i.e., the aim of the exercise is to decode the ‘limits’ of discourses—understood in a DHA way as bound and limited thematically . . . by defining their constituent topics (their contents and their hierarchies) embedded in the analysed texts. (81)

*Ukrains'ka pravda's* ([www.pravda.com.ua](http://www.pravda.com.ua)) buzzing online community of readers provided suitable material for the study. It is owned by co-founder Olena Prytula, who was also the editor-in-chief during this study, and the news website is reportedly commercially viable thanks to advertising revenues (Dutsyk). Its political orientation has remained more or less strongly oppositional to all governments since its founding in 2000 by Heorhii Gongadze. In 2010, according to Dutsyk, its daily audience was ca. 100,000 visitors (38); in 2012-13, the news outlet was visited by about 250,000-300,000 people a day (Dmytrenko). The kind of comments one encounters at *Ukrains'ka pravda* are arguably akin to those at other Ukrainian news websites, but the number of comments on *Ukrains'ka pravda* is among the nation's highest. As it was necessary to reduce the scope of this material to make it workable, I focused only on comments to articles published at the time of two electoral campaigns during the Ianukovych tenure: regional elections in October 2010 and parliamentary elections in October 2012. As language has long been an important and polarizing issue in Ukrainian election campaigns, a focus on material posted during the election campaigns makes the comments from the two different years more comparable. To further limit the scope of material, only the two last weeks of each campaign were reviewed, producing sampling timeframes of 15-31 October 2010 and 12-28

October 2012. Since this publication centres on ethnolinguistic politics, I have selected only comments to articles (current news, opinion, etc.) that dealt with language issues explicitly. This limited the sample to a total of 2,964 comments posted to 31 articles on language issues published in *Ukrains'ka pravda* during the stated periods. The highest number of comments to a single article (a national football team player's statement that he found films dubbed in Ukrainian ridiculous) was 661; the lowest number of comments to a single article (more state funding in support of the Ukrainian language) was 3. There were no uncommented articles on language in either year's campaign, and nearly all comments were made within a day of publication of the article. Sampled comments were closely read and coded to identify theme, discursive strategy, and argumentative topoi. The material was captured during election campaigns, and a follow-up check in January 2017 found that some of the most Ukrainophobic comments had been removed. Possibly the website's team banned prolific anti-Ukrainian commentators following the outbreak of war in 2014. *Ukrains'ka pravda's* editorial policy is now much more intrusive than it was during the sampling for this study; commenters have to login through social media profiles, and the scope of commenting has dropped correspondingly.

The limitations of this research include, first of all, its non-generalizability. The findings cannot represent the discourses practised and views held by all Ukrainians, as only a few readers ever bother to comment on news items, and it is impossible to establish their identity and geographical provenance with certainty due to the anonymity and multiple personae that dominate such spaces. There is every reason to believe that at least some of the most zealous defenders of Russian identity only pretended to live in Ukraine and were actually Russians in Russia. Because there was less than universal Internet access in Ukraine (between 30 and 40 percent of the population in 2010-12, "Dynamika pronyknennia") at the time the comments were produced, the social portrait of a typical user did not represent the entire nation. These results are a systematic description of discourses that active news consumers turned to while arguing about language with each other.

Another serious limitation is that comment threads were likely flooded by paid troll armies used by most of the major Ukrainian parties (chiefly, the then ruling Party of Regions) and, probably, Russian government-linked actors (see "Freedom on the Net 2012" for overview and evidence of troll activity globally and in the post-Soviet countries; cf. also Morozov). Although there is little possibility to find evidence for the scope of this phenomenon, the existence of paid Internet commentators in the informational spaces of Eastern Europe and their impact on user interactivity are not in doubt. Many of the analyzed comments were

copied-and-pasted in different threads and even in the same threads by the same user; some comments were directly in support of a specific politician or party; some comments were self-repetitive and sketchy; some of the most offensive comments appeared to represent conscious and coordinated trolling. I am aware of this limitation, but I do not see it as an obstacle to building a typology of discourses that would exist with or without troll intervention. Many comments also looked genuine, and even trolls are likely to use the most popular discourses and argumentative strategies in order to appear more authentic or persuasive.

#### CLOSE TO THE “MADDING CROWD”: KEY FINDINGS

At first sight, news readers' comments on *Ukrains'ka pravda* during the sampling timeframes embodied a classical East European *srach*, or, to use its apt English equivalent, a “shitstorm.” A *srach* is an extremely vitriolic discussion in which no sanctities are spared. It is true that the structure of the Internet medium allows anonymous contributions with very low accountability for their content. Still, a distinct feature of the East European *srach* is its heavy focus on history and ethnolinguistic issues (hence, also its relevance to this study). As such, the *srach* differs from online discourse in the West where, for example, the often uncivil comments on the *Guardian* website are polarized along the right/left ideological divide.

In 2010-12, *Ukrains'ka pravda* practised a rather liberal policy toward commenting readers. Posters had to register but each could maintain as many user profiles as he or she wished. In 2010, the website made a login through Facebook possible, but at that time a relatively small number of readers used it.

The nicknames that *Ukrains'ka pravda* posters chose could look like real names but were often parodies of the names of politicians or popular heroes or macaronic names that hinted at contradicting identities (the name and the discourse of such personae could be in discord). But this carnivalesque irony—potentially indicative of troll identities that the authors themselves did not take seriously—suggested that the commenters were unlike a bunch of laid-back people poking fun at each other. Expressions such as “your father is a dog and a pig in one, you fag”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Here and elsewhere, all translations of the analyzed readers' comments are mine. I used English substandard colloquialisms to convey the colloquial tone and violation of grammar rules in the original; pejoratives were translated using their closest equivalents in English.

were not among the harshest. Even impersonal comments were often meant to offend (“them dickhead Soviets will get in trouble soon”). The commentators tried to figure out what the real-life identities of their opponents were; comments like “you’ve been paid for saying that!” were also a common accusation. In spite of this willingness to slide into verbal abuse, the interlocutors frequently appealed to the “justice” they expected from moderators (it was not performed then and is hardly realistic now, given the scope of communication; the system excluded automatically only overtly obscene words). The posting of unrelated content, or flooding, was relatively unusual, whereas links to other resources—blogs and YouTube—popped up frequently to support statements made. Occasionally, announcements (such as for broadcasts or rallies) circulated through the comments.

#### A) DISCOURSES ON IDENTITIES

Thematically, the readers focused their discussions on three identities (see Table 1): (1) Ukrainian: speaks the Ukrainian language and professes a specific set of national memory beliefs; (2) Ukrainian: speaks Russian, and (3) Russian: Russians in Russia and self-identified Russians in Ukraine.

Discourses were either in Ukrainian or in Russian, so anti-Ukrainian statements were made in the Ukrainian language as well as in the Russian language and anti-Russian discourses were expressed in Russian and in Ukrainian. The lack of parallelism among the use of language in communicative practice, ethnolinguistic identity, and national identity has long been noted as characteristic of the Ukrainian situation (Kulyk, “Language Identity”). Some of the anti-Ukrainophone comments were made in Ukrainian, such as “Ukrainian speakers have poorer associations from childhood” (22 October 2010, in Ukrainian). Comments posted in Russian sometimes used many Ukrainian words written in Russian graphic to mock the Ukrainian language: “This parlance [*“mova”*; note the use of a Ukrainian word in a Russian linguistic frame to express contempt] stands across the throat of all normal people. Talk your prattle [*“movnaia boltovnia”*] in caves and bunkers [*“skhronakh”*],<sup>4</sup> but speak a human language in a civilized company!” (18 October 2010, in Russian). However, the usual pattern for Ukrainian-language commenters was to express concern and support for the Ukrainian language, while a typical

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<sup>4</sup> The reference is to the underground hideouts used by the anti-Soviet Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the 1940s and 1950s, thus associating the linguistic practice of speaking Ukrainian with militant extremism.

pattern for Russian-language commenters was to express either indifference or hostility toward the Ukrainian language.

### *Discourses of Denied/Affirmed Autonomy/Authenticity*

The Ukrainian identity was arguably discussed most often, and a typical comment was one that denied Ukrainians cultural authenticity and autonomy from Russians (see Table 1, column 1); in this discourse Ukrainian identity was an “artificial” construct, a foreign intrigue against Russia:

I believe that the nations that didn't know a monarch are scum [*“bydlo”*] with no rights to statehood. All 19 years of the Ukrish state confirm this. Moreover, everything left from Russians is destroyed, electronic, aircraft, space industries. Without Russians and the Russian language Ukraine will never flourish, simply because it can't happen under any conditions. (20 October 2010, in Russian)

Another comment added, “Ukrainian language doesn't exist! It's as artificial and doomed to fail as any attempt at all to build a Ukrainian state” (28 October 2010, in Russian). A comment addressed to a Ukrainian called the Ukrainian “a Russian occupier”: “It's you who is an occupier here, you Polonized ogre [*“goblin opoliachennyi”*]. You're living on the sacred Russian soil, you bitch” (25 October 2012, in Russian). The pattern of the “non-existence” of Ukrainian ethnicity, of Ukrainians as “spoilt,” “Polonized” Russians, of the national language being “a dialect of Polish” (or Russian) is among typical associations in the comments. Some comments suggested there was no hope for Ukrainians: “Those who chat in khokhol prattle [*“balakaiut na khokhlomove”*] have signs of brain deficiency. Those who start to speak it degenerate”<sup>5</sup> (15 October 2012, in Russian), and “Ukrainian language is a mind limitation” (18 October 2012, in Russian).

This discourse typically activated a hyperbolized affirmation of Ukrainian autonomy and self-sufficiency (see Table 1, column 2). Pro-Ukrainian users often referred to Kyiv's older roots compared to the age of Moscow's roots as well as to Ukraine's historical links with Europe, invoking originality and richness of the local Ukrainian culture. Statements such as “Ukrainian is a primordial [*“spokonvichna”*] language here. Whereas Russian is a mutilated dialect of Bulgarian” (18 October 2010, in Ukrainian) bridged this kind of discourse with one that denied

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<sup>5</sup> Note the use of a macaronic Russo-Ukrainian mixture (*“balakaiut' na move”*) and the derogatory ethnonym for Ukrainians, *“khokhol.”*

the authenticity of Russians who were often stereotyped as uncultured alcoholics closer to “wild Finnish tribes” (an actual quote) than to Slavs. “You have stolen even the name of your language . . . Let’s not forget that the capital of the Kyivan Rus’ was Kyiv, and later you imprudently stole this name and still use it!” (18 October 2010, in *surzhyk*) was a characteristic outcry of a subject trying to preserve his or her integrity in the face of a hostile illocutionary force.

**Table 1. Thematic structuring of the discourses on Ukrainian and Russian identities**

Discourses on identities				
Ukrainian identity		Ukrainian identity	Russophone	Russian identity
<i>Denied autonomy/ authenticity of Ukrainians</i>	<i>Affirmed autonomy/ authenticity of Ukrainians</i>	<i>Inclusion of Ukrainian Russophones</i>	<i>Exclusion of Ukrainian Russophones</i>	<i>Denied autonomy/ authenticity of Russians</i>
Unhistorical and artificial	Ancient and historical	Denial of identity differences (same people)	Othering of Russophones (internal enemy)	Alien and forcefully imposed
Corruption-prone, retrograde and underdeveloped	Modern, Europeanized	Re-appropriation of Russophones (future re-Ukrainization)	Affirmed autonomy of Ukrainian Russophones (different ethnicity)	Aimed at destruction of Ukraine and/or Ukrainians
Preference-seeking, hypocritical and lying	Natural and legitimate			Aggressive and undemocratic
Xenophobic	Democratic			Discriminatory

The fact that a discourse of the affirmed authenticity or autonomy of Russians was virtually absent from this communication by users (cf. Table 1, last column: absence of affirmative discourses on Russian identity) was an intriguing finding. Supporters of Russian identity often offended and mocked their opponents; they even engaged in posting medieval maps with the name of Russia on them, but they almost never tried to legitimize their identification by appealing to outstanding qualities of the Russian language or achievements of the Russian culture. On the contrary, self-legitimation was among the most recurrent subjects of the Ukrainian posts (Table 1, column 2). Those speaking in favour of a Russian identity and a Russian language for Ukraine did not engage in self-legitimation; perhaps they felt they did not need it.

### *The Problem of Russian-speaking Ukrainians*

Another prolific identity discourse unfolded around the problem of Russophone Ukrainians. One of the main discursive strategies here was their alienation by Ukrainian identity bearers (Table 1, column 4). “Zaporizhzhia is not Ukraine. They live there by Russian laws. If they are so happy alone, why we Ukrainians should mess with them?” (15 October 2012), asked one of the online posters in Russian (sic!). Another agreed: “For me, people are divided into two categories: 1) the citizens of Ukraine who respect our language and culture; 2) the children of our murderers, plus betrayers who hate everything Ukrainian and don’t know their own language” (25 October 2010, in Ukrainian). Russophones were often asked to leave the country. On the other hand, Ukrainophones were invited by Russian-oriented commentators to leave for Europe “to wash the aged Europeans’ butts” (18 October 2010, in Russian), a reference to the stereotypical perception of Ukrainian migrant workers in the European Union (EU) as caregivers for incapacitated old people.

An alternate strategy materialized in a type of discourse that tried to present Russian-speaking Ukrainians as an integral part of the nation (Table 1, column 3). This recurring pattern included statements by Russian speakers who claimed to be patriotic and defended the official status of the Ukrainian language; simultaneously, many comments posted in Ukrainian emphasized the right to speak any language in private as long as the official position of the Ukrainian language was not challenged.

However, some commenters with explicit pro-Russian political orientations (and in the case itemized below, pro-Russian linguistic sympathies) affirmed a separate identity of the Russian-speaking group in Ukraine. As one of them says,

you're trying to prove that the only autochthonic ["*korennoi*"] population here is Ukrainian but this is not true. There are many Russian villages in the Kharkiv region, there used to be lots of settlers ["*pereselentsev*"] from central Russia. That's why the Russians have exactly the same rights to their mother tongue. (15 October 2010, in Russian)

In this example, the reference to "the Russians" as "settlers" and the assertion of their claim to indigenous status as the cause for this claim, betrayed the poster's reliance on an imperialist narrative of colonization. Such discourse often came packaged with the idea that Western Ukrainians are a separate nation (typically described as savage and xenophobic), comparing them with more "progressive" Eastern Ukrainians who speak Russian; this assessment was pinpointed by Moser based on other online material ("Colonial").

Some participants of the *Ukrains'ka pravda* discussions maintained that there were no differences between Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians and that this was an "artificial" problem. Posters who practised this discourse (in both Russian and Ukrainian) claimed "it makes no difference which language to speak," "we are all Ukrainians," "the whole problem is made up." Sometimes they simply ignored the Russian-speaking population or downplayed the issue with an adage such as "everybody still understands Ukrainian."

This links to the discourses on ethnolinguistic vitality, language policy, and planning issues (Table 2). While many posters expressed a similar denial/affirmation of language authenticity, some comments pointed explicitly toward potential solutions. For those protecting Ukrainian in these comment threads, options typically included either a vaguely defined protection of the language or its elevation to a compulsory status in various spheres of life (sometimes all spheres; see columns "Legalism" and "Radical legalism" in Table 2). The Russophone-favouring discourses objected to restrictions on the use of Russian (Table 2, "Legalism") or suggested explicit projects to contain Ukrainian in rural reservations or in the three oblasts of the historical Galicia (Halychyna; Table 2, "Radical legalism"). Others proposed to let the Ukrainian language die out peacefully and "naturally" (Table 2, "Laissez-faire").

Akin to the denial of identity differences, the very fact of a language divide was denied in many comments, with some users admitting there was a language divide but dismissing its importance or implying that emphasizing the divide was itself an anti-Ukrainian strategy (Table 2a, "Problem discrediting"). The common sense argument that the language problem was far from the most urgent issue on the table echoed the common-sense diversion from the problematization of bilingualism (cf. Kulyk, "Constructing"). A subtype of discourse that urged others to stop speaking Russian in response to the governmental crackdown on

Ukrainian was practised by posters who claimed, themselves, to be Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Messages with similar content appeared quite regularly. Alternatively, this discourse can also be operated from an anti-Ukrainophone position: “I lack words... Pensioners are dying, and they are going to throw away billions on the [Ukrainian] language [“*mova*”], who will speak it, ghosts?” (15 October 2012, in Russian).

**Table 2. Discourses on vitality and language planning**

	Estimated vitality		Problem-solving		
	<i>Ukrainian</i>	<i>Russian</i>	<i>Legalism</i>	<i>Radical legalism</i>	<i>Laissez-faire</i>
<b>Pro-Ukrainophone</b>	High (optimism)	N/A	Ukrainian must be (legally) protected	Ukrainian must be made compulsory	N/A
	Low (alarmism)				
<b>Pro-Russophone</b>	Low (negative alarmism)	N/A	Discrediting (legal) restrictions	Use of Ukrainian must be limited (reservations; Galicia)	Ukrainian must go extinct

**Table 2a. Discourses on vitality and language planning**

		Problem-discrediting	
<b>Pro-Ukrainophone</b>	Wrong problem: language conflict weaponized to destroy Ukraine	Irrelevant problem: Ukrainian will survive despite all	Artificial problem to distract from more important ones
<b>Pro-Russophone</b>			

### *Discourses on Ethnolinguistic Vitality*

“Ukrainian linguistic alarmism” surfaced in discourses that stated that the Ukrainian language needed protection and something must be done about it; otherwise it could indeed go extinct. The omnipresence of this discourse in the comments indicated that the linguistic vitality of Ukrainian was perceived by many speakers to be low (Table 2, “Estimated vitality: Ukrainian”). Far fewer authors who practise this discourse have actually pro-Russian inclinations and estimate the hypothetical extinction of Ukrainian as a positive development. Two points of view accompanied this perception: “It is Ukrainian that has been discriminated for decades and now needs state support to recover. There are no Ukrainian education, newspapers and television in Crimea, in Donbas. Ukrainian speakers are still discriminated everywhere. This is Russian fascism!!!” (18 October 2010, in Russian) versus “Ukrainian language will die soon, and the sooner the better, because this is the only serious obstacle for the development of the country” (18 October 2010, in Russian).

On the other hand, a number of commentators felt optimistic about the future of the Ukrainian language (Table 2, “Estimated vitality: Ukrainian”). Typically, this kind of discourse referred to the author’s visit to Eastern Ukraine or to another region perceived as non-Ukrainian-

speaking where he or she had seen someone who had unexpectedly spoken Ukrainian. “I’ve been to my hometown of Chernihiv recently and was surprised by a good deal of people who speak Ukrainian on the street. Perhaps Russian chauvinists miscalculated it, and Russification backfires!” (18 October 2010, in Ukrainian) and “In fact, Ukrainian language is very much awaited in Eastern Ukraine. Those few Ukrainian schools are overcrowded, people want to hear Ukrainian, they need it...” (18 October 2010, in Ukrainian).

A significant part of the discursive practices was devoted to historical explanations for the current situation. Pro-Ukrainophones tried to explain it through persecutions of the past, while pro-Russophones perceived a natural expansion and acquisition of the living space. Two widely represented discursive positions on language policy in Ukraine are “laissez-faire,” i.e., free from government intervention, and “legalist,” where the law should be upheld. The laissez-faire point of view was reflected in the following comment: “No Russian as the second official language—no such country as Ukraine” (15 October 2010, in Russian); “The problem is that de-facto Russian is the language of majority, without any support. Ukrainian is a de-facto regional language. The language of the majority should be the only official language” (26 October 2010, in Russian).

Posters who utilized the legalist position might agree or not agree with the official status of Russian, but they pointed out that the laws should be upheld and official bilingualism would not mean the right not to speak the other official language. However, also typical were statements positing “there can only be one official language” (always framed as a reference to the Constitution or to current legislation). Other users reversed this argument by saying that legislative measures would not work, whatever their content. Users with more radical strains of legalism suggested, depending on their position in the language debate, that Ukrainian be imposed forcefully through legally binding norms or that the use of Ukrainian be legally restricted.

From the perspective of arguments used (Table 3), all these discourses were based on a rather limited set of *topoi*, which were mostly shared by pro-Ukrainophone and pro-Russophone participants. Both sides actively appealed to European/Western experiences called in to normalize and promote the user’s proposal; posters of all identifications employed arguments based on fairness, and on moral and ethical considerations. Historical reasons poured from all sides, as did statements that something must be done because the law demanded it.

Certain *topoi* were endemic to specific discourses (compare the use of arguments that supported one of the ideological positions marked as “UA” or “RU” in Table 3). For instance, pro-Ukrainophone commenters

often used arguments that implied that strengthening the status of the Ukrainian language was important for state security and/or was a precondition of national survival. Pro-Russophone readers never used this strategy; their unique topoi was an appeal to strength: arguments of pragmatism and economic advantages linked to the command of Russian came to their service as well as Darwinist reasoning about the survival of the “fittest” language. Pro-Ukrainophone posters never made use of such arguments.

Both communities, however, were familiar with perhaps the most widespread type of argumentation: personal discreditation of the opponent(s) through suggestions of intellectual deficiency or sexual deviance. Moreover, lack of education and culture, cognitive malfunction, and what was perceived as unacceptable gender identity and sexual behaviour, very often fused into a composite negative identity where increasingly intimate offences against personal integrity represented different intensity gradations of personal verbal combat. However, the typical argumentation pattern “(you are a) boor—retard—pervert” suggested that the poster engaging in this type of communicative behaviour perceived that unacceptable political views and unattractive personal identity implied deficiencies at other levels of personal identity; that is, an unpleasant person must be worthless at all levels. Thus, gendering and sexing were inevitable mechanisms of constructing an image of the opponent.

As part of this strategy, the comments were typically xenophobic with regard to non-Caucasian races (a recurrent example from either side: “I’m not an Asian, thank God, to speak Russian/Ukrainian”), to non-traditional sexual practices, and to those with mental or physical disability (“Are you a madman to say this?” “This is the language of the disabled,” “you faggot,” “you goat-fuckers from the Carpathians”).

Pro-Ukrainian discourses typically compared Ukraine with nation-states such as Germany or France (dominated by single nation cultures where the dominant ethnic groups exert power over minorities). This may reflect the desire of the Ukrainophones to attain the dominant position of the powerful titular majority, which they perceive their group to be deprived of. Pro-Russian discourses tended to compare Ukraine with multi-ethnic states, to legitimize and preserve Russian domination on “liberal” laissez-fair terms, albeit the origins of this dominant position are far from liberal.

**Table 3. Argumentation topoi in discursive strategies**

Topoi	Use in pro-Ukrainophone or pro-Russophone discourses	
Western experience	UA	RU
State security	UA	
National survival	UA	
Pragmatism and economy		RU
Fairness	UA	RU
Moral and ethics	UA	RU
History	UA	RU
Law-abiding	UA	RU
Darwinism		RU
Opponent's discrediting	UA	RU

A close reading of the comments revealed many contradictions and inconsistencies that are products of the current power structure in Ukrainian society. One user frequently quoted statistics that indicated a shrinking of the social basis of the Ukrainian language since the country's independence, concluding that Ukrainians continue to switch to the "better developed" and "more competitive" Russian language. By presenting this situation as natural and hiding the real implications behind the words "evolution" and "development," Web commentators legitimized the outcomes of past discriminatory policies and justified the destruction of the other group's language.

Finally, it is necessary to mention that the *Ukrains'ka pravda* discourses cited above were usually intermixed, loosely grouping around the three poles of: ardent Ukrainian language supporters, pro-Russian posters, and language "non-combatants," shifting dynamically among closely related discourses. It was often difficult to distinguish between authentic and ironic statements.

## BETWEEN ASSIMILATION, CONFLICT, AND CREATIVITY: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

From the perspective of ethnolinguistic identity theory, under conditions of bilingualism, the language speakers' perceptions of ethnolinguistic vitality determine the group dynamic. If the ethnolinguistic vitality is perceived to be weak, the language speakers will tend to assimilate peacefully into a more powerful group, unless the group's hard boundaries force them to challenge the group forcefully.

The *Ukrains'ka pravda* commenters had both optimist and pessimist perspectives of Ukrainian language vitality. However, this ambiguity should be interpreted in relation to the status of the competing language, Russian. An evaluation of the comments posted revealed that there was not much concern about the vitality of the Russian language in Ukraine and there was considerable concern about the vitality of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine. Therefore, one can argue that most commenters perceived the vitality of the Russian language to be stronger than the vitality of the Ukrainian language. Some pro-Ukrainophone commenters considered the prevalence of the Ukrainian language to be unnecessary for Ukraine's status as a nation and a state, so concerns about its vitality became irrelevant to them. Yet even the staunchly pro-Russophone commenters displayed no anxiety about the survival of the Russian language in Ukraine, which would have been logical had they perceived a loss in its vitality. The lack of discourse on the decreased vitality of the Russian language in Ukraine is evidence that its dominant status is perceived to be unchallenged. It testifies equally to the absence of a threat to the Russian language from any pro-Ukrainophone language policy, although such a policy would certainly be decried by the pro-Russophone commenters. The fact that only pro-Russophone discussants used argumentative strategies of "laissez-faire" and "survival of the fittest" while only pro-Ukrainophone posters used protective tactics (state security, national survival), and advocated for corresponding policies, attests to the former's confidence and the latter's sense of vulnerability.

This analysis shows that Ukrainophones' assimilation into the Russophone group in 2010-12 was likely obstructed by factors such as language proximity and ease of code-switching, but also by the unique official status of the Ukrainian language that increased its perceived vitality (in line with Bilaniuk and Melnyk's findings). The benefits of this status were magnified by the perception of Ukrainian as the national language, making it also the most legitimate language of Ukraine and motivating pro-Ukrainophone activists among both Ukrainian and Russian speakers as well as a large portion of the public to support its greater use and state promotion. This also explains why attempts to

upgrade the status of the Russian language faced (particularly in 2010-12) fierce resistance among the Ukrainophone community. This resistance was not a manifestation of xenophobia, it arose from a sense of vulnerability and an acute perception that upgrading the status of the Russian language would lower the relative vitality of the Ukrainian language and infringe on its legitimacy. This fact and the fact that Ukraine is different from monolingual European societies must be taken into account by both domestic and international institutions and actors in their implementation of language policy. Ukrainophones' language concerns are probably further aggravated by the example of neighbouring Belarus, where the loss of Belarusian's official status, and the decline in Belarusian language education, has led to the endangered status of the Belarusian language. In Ukraine's situation, even though the vitality of the Ukrainian language has eroded, its status supremacy and its perceived legitimacy stimulated some speakers to engage in social conflict (such as occasional verbal fights in public spaces and on social media) or social creativity (evident in the increased diversity in the higher-end Ukrainian-language cultural product in the recent years). However, in the long run, social creativity might not be enough to prevent a slow yet constant assimilation of Ukrainophones by Russophones among less incentivized Ukrainian speakers, let alone reverse it.

One factor that may harden group boundaries and raise the cost of assimilation is, paradoxically, the strengthening of ethnolinguistic identities through the practice of hate speech. In the comments analyzed, the use of personal pronouns was habitually built around "us versus them" discussions. The commentators developed a rich derogatory nomenclature for each other. Whereas politically pro-Ukrainian discourses tended to use ancient pejoratives for Russians such as "*katsap*" and "*moskal*"; a hit with the pro-Russian writers was "*svidomit*" (from the Ukrainian "*svidomyi*" "[nationally] aware/concerned") modified with the superimposition of "*sodomit*," suggesting deviance and thus inferiority in fundamental aspects of identity, such as sexuality and gender identity. This need to reassure its own normality by reinscribing the Other with what is perceived as deficient gender and sexual identity indicates a fundamental uncertainty in the offending subject (apart from cases of pragmatic coercion, aggressive behaviour is often seen by social psychologists as a manifestation of personal uncertainty; cf. Felson).

Interestingly, some users adopted "*svidomit*" for a nickname and began to use it with defiant pride. This is how the formation of racist and anti-racist discourses are described in Wodak and Reisigl, and this is how hate speech produces and strengthens its own object in Butler's theory that pinpoints the gender aspects of "Otherness" constructed from a feminist theory perspective. While the actual language situation in Ukraine is characterized

by hybridity and diversity, the antagonistic debates represent two clear-cut ethnolinguistic groups. This speeds up the actual process of their consolidation. Hate speech is an especially powerful tool of this collective subject constitution, and antagonistic discourses tend to activate each other through it. The verbal aggression of pro-Russophone users stimulated not only Ukrainian-speakers but also many Russian-speaking Ukrainians to reaffirm their identity and strengthen commitment to the Ukrainian language. Judging by the 2010-12 findings in *Ukrains'ka pravda*, the linguistic dimension of Euromaidan and post-2014 developments was linked to two factors: the perceived threat to the vitality of the Ukrainian language and the exposure to hate speech by pro-Russophone actors. To understand today's language situation in Ukraine, the preceding period of Ianukovych's pro-Russian administration must be recalled. Current developments may be viewed as ad-hoc and self-contradictory responses to the discursive conflict in those Ianukovych years. The society attempts to overcome that conflict through a rise in support for the Ukrainian language, increasing its vitality, but also emphasizes the freedom of linguistic choice, thus continuing to normalize the de facto bilingualism.

The absence of Russian language affirmation in the *Ukrains'ka pravda* discourses reflects the balance of symbolic power in Ukrainian society. I assume that Russian-speaking posters did not engage in affirmation of their identities because they did not see a need for this. The symbolic capital of Russian culture in Ukraine is, or at least was at the time the discussions were analyzed, greater than that of the symbolic Ukrainian culture, as it still occupies a more prestigious position that has become genuinely questioned only after the Russian aggression. Therefore, the silence of the pro-Russian commentators presumably reflected confidence in their cultural hegemony. "This territory was conquered by us, and it will remain ours forever", in the words of one of the commenting personae.

From the perspective of the potential for citizens to participate in new media, the comments posted by the *Ukrains'ka pravda* readers represented a failure of democracy. Rather than embodying the ideal of the public sphere, the unmoderated user interactivity most often degenerated into the "shitstorm" model. There was little space online for deliberation, as opponents juggled personal offences and irrational arguments. Thanks to anonymity and lack of hierarchy (moderation), unbridled personal attacks and manipulation prevailed. Thus, the very media logic of anonymized reader's feedback is clearly linked to communicative patterns of aggressive behaviour.

This does not mean there was no space for democratic process. First, incivility can function as a ritualized jocular rhetorical convention rather than testify to political practices; agonistic verbal combats are inherent to countless cultures around the world, from Germanic *flyting* to rapper

freestyle battles, from certain genres of Arabic poetry to African folklore (cf. Udupa's analysis of Indian *gaali*). As such, verbal combats may provide a carnivalesque relief or galvanize group allegiances. Second, fierce online discussions may include rational thinking and stimulate the consideration of important social issues. Moreover, the crystallization of identities through a flawed hate-speech-laden process as described above, may prepare the ground for more civilized, consensual, and democratic interactions. A terrible and failed discussion may still prove better than no discussion at all. Furthermore, Butler's assertion that censorship of hate speech may be unproductive, as it hampers more than assists the formation of subjectivities and identities, might reflect a similar situation to the one described above. This presents an avenue for future research: going beyond the virtual space into the real world, with individual biographies, case studies, in-depth interviews and focus groups aimed at locating personal motivations and strategies, could help understand how Ukrainian society accumulated energy for its outpouring of anger during Euromaidan and how its subsequent events are shaping the current media and language landscapes.

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