Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies 7: 1
December 2015, 40-57

The Ukraine Crisis: Ethno-Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract
There is no gainsaying the fact that, 22 years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia is still counting on the losses of that historical development. Apart from losing its position as a regional power, especially among the former union republics of the former USSR, Russia is yet to come to terms with losing Crimea, which it considers as the first great price wrestled from the Ottoman Empire, a mark to Russia's rise to great-power status, and a warm-water port with direct access to the Mediterranean and thus, the wider world; and also Sevastopol, the Crimean port city where Russian Black Sea fleet docks. No wonder, Russia had already started celebrating the annexation of Crimea, thus escalating crisis in that region. A lot has been written about this crisis but a little, if at all, has been said about the ethno-linguistic dimension of the crisis, hence, this piece. An effort is made in this paper to critically analyze the historical background of Ukrainian and Russian languages in Ukraine and the state of Ukrainian language in the Soviet era. Also analyzed is the new language law in Ukraine and how all these contribute to the present

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Ukrainian crisis. The work concludes that Ukraine is a bilingual country and that the government of the country will do well to maintain the status quo.

Keywords: Ukraine; Russia; ethno-linguistic; Crimea; Party of Regions.

1. Introduction

Not long ago, the whole world was jolted by Moscow's intention to annex Crimea, a Ukrainian territory where ethnic Russians make up some 60% of a population of 2 million with ethnic Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars accounting for the remainder. Among other causes of this problem is the perceived threat to the rights of Russian speakers throughout Ukraine and their right to use their native language. Language issues have been crucial in the history of Russian-Ukrainian relations and to a great extent have helped in forming the preconditions for Ukrainian nation-building. It is part of Russian foreign policy to promote Russian language in the *Near Abroad* (a term for the new states that were created after the disintegration of the Soviet Union). Apart from this, the federal programme of 1996 on Russian language states that at the state level, it is necessary to ensure the support for Russian as a powerful social factor for the consolidation of the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), as a stimulant for the realisation of the geopolitical interests of Russia (the Romyr Report, 2000).

According to the 2001 national census of Ukraine, 78% of the population consists of Ukrainians, and most of them (85%) claim Ukrainian as their native language. On the other hand,

about 50% of Ukrainian citizens declare Russian to be their language of convenience or language of daily communication. Both of the Ukrainian Law on Languages (1989) and the Ukrainian Constitution (1996) recognize Ukrainian as the sole *state language* while Russian is placed among other minority languages that can be legally used and protected by law alongside the state language. Another index of Razumkov Centre states that in the early years of the 21st century, the number of ethnic Ukrainians who spoke Russian was 30% higher than the number of Ukrainian speakers. However, today, 60% of residents of Ukraine consider Ukrainian to be their native language. When translated into the language of everyday usage, 53.3% of the general population speaks Ukrainian, and 44.5% Russian (2003-2004 State Statistics Committee of Ukraine).

2. Historical Background of Ukrainian and Russian in Ukraine

Comparatively, Ukrainian language has fewer speakers than Russian language. The process of restructuring the modern Ukrainian literary language can be dated towards the end of the 19th century, when the country was largely lacking independence, territorial unity, and was economically backward. At that time, the territories with Ukrainian population were divided among three countries, namely Russia, Hungary, and Austria; as such, there were three different laws regulating the Ukrainian language in these territories. According to Shevelon (1984:134), under Austrian rule, 13% of the Ukrainian population (mainly East Galychyna and Bukovina) enjoyed

relatively good condition for the Ukrainian language due to the rather liberal Austrian constitution of 1867, which allowed regional administration to use local languages in public life and schooling. However, Ukrainians were the minorities (belonging mainly to the lower classes) in the territories where they lived. Under Hungarian rule in Transcarpathia, the most backward of all Ukrainian territories, the Ukrainian language existed as a mixture of local rural dialects and had very little chance of developing under clear conditions of total marginalization. In the Russian Empire, where 85% of the Ukrainians lived, Ukrainian language rights were also strictly limited.

In Galychyna, notwithstanding the restrictions imposed by Polish administration, Ukrainian primary schools were widespread, the Ukrainian press was well developed, and the language was used as a *banner of national consolidation and liberation*. In the Russian Empire, however, publication of books, journals and newspapers in Ukranian was restricted; theater performances were subjected to complicated regulations; schooling in Ukrainian was prohibited; and the language of the juridical system and local administration was Russian. Under these conditions, the Ukrainian language was virtually eliminated from all spheres of public life and was given the official status of a Russian dialect unsuitable for political and academic purpose (Shevelon 1987:68). The mentality of the inferior status of Ukrainian language was equally shared among Ukrainians. Most of their intelligentsia considered it a mainly rural, poetic, and folkloric language and as a result supported the idea of bilingualism. As Zhurzhenko (2013:89) puts it, a limited vocabulary (particularly concerning scientific and technical

terminology) based on rural origins, regional differences and strong influence of local dialects, and underdeveloped and shaky grammar rules are straits that characterized Ukrainian at the beginning of the 20th century. She goes further to say that Ukrainian was the language of the peasants and of those very narrow strata of intelligentsia which came from the peasants and served their interests; priests, teachers, sometimes doctors. Capitalism in Ukraine speaks Russian. The bourgeoisie and the new technical intelligentsia were largely alienated from Ukrainian, which caused the lack, not only of state, but also of economic support for national cultural development. Their second-class rating of the Ukrainian language continued till almost the end of the Second World War when western territories were added to the Soviet Ukraine.

This is a clear instance of application of critical approaches to language ideology which explore the capacity for language and linguistic ideologies to be used as strategies for maintaining social power and domination. Woolard and Schieffelin (1994:132) describe them as some aspects of representation and social cognition, with particular social origins or functional and formal characteristics. Government policies often reflect the tension between two contrasting types of language ideologies: ideologies that conceive of language as a resource, problem, or right (Richard 1984) and ideologies that conceive of language as pluralistic phenomena (Woolard 1998).

Russian language is seen here in the perspective of standard language ideology which Lippi-Green (1997:214) defines as a bias toward an abstract, idealized homogeneous language, which is imposed and maintained by dominant institutions and which

has as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class. He goes further to say that part of this ideology is a belief that standard languages are internally consistent.

3. Ukrainian in USSR Days

The period prior to the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922, preceding to the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, marked an era of high political instability during which the regime changed several times and most of the territory was beyond the control of the central authorities. Even under the Soviet authority, only the western regions out of most of the Ukrainian territory remained under Poland. It was obvious that independent Ukrainian state could not be realized and the official policy turned again to some version of Russian-Ukrainian bilingualism. Of course, the Soviet leadership advocated the idea of *nation's right to self-determination* but this was hardly adhered to because of persistent internal and external threats to the new regime which seems to compel the need for centralization and control over the leadership in the Soviet republics.

At that time, the Communist Party leaders in Ukraine were mainly Russians. While the working class spoke Russian, the memory of the war with the nationalist government fueled hostility toward the Ukrainian language despite the official internationalization. Although the Party's *Realpolitic* was not to impede peasants from speaking Ukrainian, the start of industrialization, as a matter of fact, did strengthen the position of the Russian language in the cities (Zhurzhenko 2013: 68). In

1923, however, the party leadership in Moscow initiated a new wave of Ukrainization which came into effect from 1925 to 1932. Under the new policy, forceful measures were implemented to ensure the official status of the Ukrainian language; special courses for administrative officials were opened, schools and higher education system changed to Ukrainian, while linguists and philologists started the serious work of modernizing terminology and ordering grammar. This resulted to a marginal rise of modern Ukrainian arts and literature and a boost to Ukrainian culture. All these were in line with Soviet's new policy in supporting anti-imperialist struggle in the colonial world. This trend, however, did not last long because of the total change of political climate associated with Stalinist terror of the early 1930s. Consequently, the Ukrainization campaign was stopped on orders from Moscow. As Shevelov (1987:143) puts it, party leaders responsible for it were dismissed or arrested (for instance, the leader of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Mykola Skrypnyk, committed suicide in 1933), and thousands of representatives of the Ukrainian intelligentsia were accused of *bourgeois nationalism* and thus repressed. The social basis of further Ukrainization was eventually eliminated by a deliberately organized famine among the rural population. Further repressions were meted out on the language after the Soviet war with Nazi Germany when some ethnic minorities, including Ukraine, were accused of being *not loyal enough* to Soviet power. Millions of Ukrainians were forcibly exiled to Siberia. Many who did not accept Soviet rule and tried to avoid political repression emigrated to the West.

Those that remained were seen as dissidents and more aggressive repressions were meted out to them.

The death of Stalin ushered in a new democratization of public life and the end of the 1950s witnessed remarkable national cultural renaissance. A greater interest with more consciousness in the Ukrainian language and literature was introduced among the population by young poets, writers, and artists widely known as the *Shestidesiatnikis* or generation of the 60s. Poetry readings, public lectures, and celebrations of cultural events attracted students and intelligentsia both in Eastern and Western Ukraine. The names of some Ukrainian writers and artists suppressed by Stalin's regime were reincorporated into the Ukrainian culture as a consequence of those first democratic acts of re-remembering (Zhurzhenko, 2013:88). This new consciousness, however, did not continue without some controls by the so-called liberal and pro-Ukrainian party leadership, else Moscow's attention could be drawn to it and possible sanctions and repressions introduced and reinvigorated. According to Lyudmila Alekseeva (1992:77), a historian of the dissident movement, the aim of the Shestidesiatriki was the democratization of the Soviet system and the suspension of justification, and they believed in the possibility of achieving this under the conditions of Soviet system. She argues that Lenin's principles of nationalities politics in the USSR were distorted by Stalin and later Khrushchev, and the idea of a *fusion of nations* into a homogeneous *soviet people* and the treatment of national cultures (i.e. cultures of nationalities) as secondary cultures contradicts the very idea of communism. This position was not acceptable to the Party leadership. Consequently, arrests

of Ukrainian intelligentsia started in 1965 which succeeded in fuelling public solidarity for the national cause. Ethnic Russians were encouraged by the Society leadership to relocate to Ukrainian lands and supported Ukrainians moving to the eastern and northern territories of Russia. The outcome of this according to Romyr Report (2000) is that, by 1991, ethnic Russians composed 22.1% of the total population of Ukraine compared with 8.2% in 1926. 60% of them in 1991 were immigrants. By 1987, 72% of the schools in Ukraine taught in Russian, 16% in Ukrainian, and 12% had a mixed curriculum.

According to the Language Law *On Languages in the Ukrainian SSR*, Ukrainian received the status of a single state-language in 1989. Article 10 of the new Ukrainian constitution confirmed this status in 1996 and conferred responsibility on the state to ensure universal development and functioning of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of social life on all territories of Ukraine. As contained in the constitution, the people of Ukraine are divided into three categories: the titular nation (Ukrainians); the core nations; and the national minorities. It should be noted that the Russian language which is still very influential in Ukraine, automatically gained secondary status, and a campaign to introduce the Ukrainian language into the educational system and state structures began. This unfortunately is yet to yield any positive result. It is remarkable that in the Eastern and Southern Ukraine (both historically Russian speaking), Ukrainization faced hidden resistance and, as such, was rather superficial and not very successful. As Ryabchuk (2012:104) puts it, both the Ukrainian Law on Languages (1989) and the Constitution (1996) recognize

Ukrainian as the sole state language whereas Russian is placed among other minority languages that can be legally used and protected by law alongside the state language. However, legal mechanisms to effectively enforce the use of the state language are yet to be elaborated.

The language law has been applied arbitrarily, selectively, and in a highly opportunistic manner. The consequence of which is, according to the Romyer Report (2000), the percentage of Ukrainian language schools reached 75.5% and that of higher learning in Ukrainian 66% by the end of the 1998/1999 academic year. During the same period, the percentage of newspapers printed in Ukrainian fell from 68% (1990) to 39.6% (1998), and the percentage of Ukrainian language magazines dropped from 90.4% to 11.5%.

Another blow on the Ukrainization of Ukraine was the ratification of the European Charter of Minority Languages by the Ukrainian Parliament in December 1999. According to the Charter, the Russian language can be considered as in fact having equal status with Ukrainian in the regions (i.e. administrative units) where the Russian-speaking community exceeds 20% of the population. Currently, the total population of Ukraine which is about 50 million speaks mainly two languages: Ukrainian and Russian. According to Golovaha and Panina (2000:141) in a recent sociological survey, the following statistics subsist.

People consider as their native language:

Ukrainian	-	63.8%
Russian	-	35.1%

Other languages - 1.2%

But the language of communication in the family may differ from their native language:
Ukrainian - 39.1%
Russian - 36.0%
Russian/ Ukrainian (depending on situation) - 24.8%
Other languages - 0.2%

From this analysis, there is no gainsaying the fact that Ukraine is a bilingual country. The language split has two dimensions: a regional division between western and eastern Ukraine and a social division between the urban and rural populations. Ukrainian urban and industrial east has a high concentration of the country's 11.4 million ethnic Russians (22.1% of the total population) and is predominantly Russian speaking. Almost 70% of the Russian population lives in the five oblasts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Duipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhya. It is important to note that what differentiates Ukraine from other republics of the former USSR, especially the Baltic States is that Russian language is widespread and still dominant in culture, science, business, and other spheres (except, possibly, politics). The ruling political and administrative elite remains to a large extent Russian speaking and Ukrainian is used mainly for political purposes. As Zhurzhenko (2013:32) puts it, loyal to the state and not opposing its Ukrainization policy, the new middle class is ready to pay for their children's education in Russian, which is still more prestigious and presumably of better quality (not to speak of the business elites who appear to be more

committed to English). Riabchyk (2011) quoting Hanna Herman, the deputy Head of the Omnipotent Presidential Administration, recognized that Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians are, in fact, second-rate citizens in Ukraine with a very weak social and economic position. In contrast to the dominant Russophones they are left with a structurally restrained ability to influence the political, economic, and cultural life of the country. Herman went further to say that

> Rich people are mostly Russian-speaking, while a great many citizens of Ukraine with Ukrainian mentality are poor people. This is the legacy of the first Ukrainian leaders. Whereas Vyacheslav Chornovil (a former political prisoner and one of the leaders of national-democratic movement during perestroika and the early years of Ukrainian independence) led us to meetings, where we sang Chervona Kalyna (a patriotic song), the Komsomol functionaries have seized banks, privatized factories, and now they are wealthy, influential, and dictate fashion.
> http://ua.korrespondent.net/ukraine/1194816-german-ukrayinomovni-gromadyani-ne-majut-finansovogo.vplivu-v-krayini

By this, Herman implies that the Ukrainophones are in a backward position not because of colonial legacy and particular policies of Tsars and Commissars, and certainly not because of today's policies of the present administration, but that *Ukrainophones* are socially handicapped, first and foremost,

because they sang patriotic songs with their gullible leaders and cared too much about national symbolism, while the former Soviet *nomenklatura* seized power and property and effectively transformed the political dominance of the *Russophone* Soviet elite into an economic one.

4. Russian-speakers, Ukrainian-speakers and National Identity in Ukraine

Russian speakers believe and insist that they represent the interest of the highly developed eastern part of Ukraine, where the main industrial and scientific centers are located. They argue that limiting the scope of operation of the Russian language would lead to scientific, industrial and social backwardness. According to them, 80% of library materials are still in Russian, and the publications market is dominated by Russian books. Russian is still the language of international communication in the former USSR, and is one of the most spoken languages in the world. Therefore, limiting Russian cannot be considered a rational policy for the future of the Ukrainian nation. On the other hand, the Ukrainian speakers use the term *Soviet* as a label for Russian speakers as anti-national and anti-Ukrainian, and Russian-speakers are doomed to us 'old-fashioned' versions of Soviet history in order to construct their identity. Looking at the debate between liberals and communitarians in the contemporary situation in Ukraine, the main peculiarity of this situation is that there are three major linguistic groups based on two languages: Russian-speaking Russians, Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, and Russian-speaking Ukrainians (Wilson, 1997). Ukrainian nationalists usually interpret it in terms of

disadvantages of nation building. According to Ryabchuk (2000:133), the weakest and vaguest sense of national identity is that of the *Russophone* Ukrainians who are rather *Ukrainian* in political terms, and rather 'Russians' in terms of culture. Both Ukrainians and Russians compete for the support of this group, and both claim it to be their own. On many levels, this competition looks like a civil *cold war*, with hardly predictable results.

5. Ukraine New Language Law

On July 3, 2011, the ruling party of Ukraine, the Party of Regions, submitted a draft law 'on the fundamentals of the national language policy' to the Ukrainian parliament for consideration and making it a law. The law stipulates that any of the 18 'regional and minority' languages spoken by 10 (or more per cent of the people in a certain administrative regions can be used in that region as the 'official' language alongside Ukrainian. This by implication means that Russian would take an official status in 13 of Ukraine's 27 designated regions, i.e. 11 'oblasts' (provinces) and the cities of Kiev and Sevastopol. In the far western area of Transcarpathia, Hungarian would gain official status. In Chernivtsi and southwestern Odessa, the same would apply to Romanian and Bulgarian. On the Crimean peninsula, the Tatar language would also gain such status. Altogether, Ukraine would have 18 'official languages'. Expectedly, the acceptance of this sparked spontaneous mixed reactions. Some analysts maintain that the law would undermine the status of Ukrainian, which has been the only official language since the country gained independence in

1991. They anticipate a deepening of a regional divide between the Ukrainian-speaking western regions, and the mainly *Russophone* areas of the south and east. This school of thought argues that the main goal of the language bill is not to protect Russian, which is the dominant language in most regions and areas, but to marginalize further and ultimately eliminate Ukrainian. To them, the language bill is designed not for Ukrainian citizens but for post-soviet bureaucrats who are increasingly tired of a *de facto* bilingualism, i.e. daily communication mostly in Russian but paperwork mostly in Ukrainian, and would like to move largely towards a more comfortable Russian mono-lingualism, under the so-called 'regional language.'

On the other hand, the law was lauded internationally as fully corresponding to Ukraine's European operations and European obligations. The Associated Press opines that allowing or banning the use of Russian is one of the most divisive topics in post-Soviet Ukraine. It announced that the dark age of persecution of all things Russian is drawing to an end; and readers can sigh with relief because the new law *would allow the use of the Russian language in courts, hospitals, and other institutions in the Russian-speaking regions of the country*.

5. Historical Factor to the Language Problem

Historically, the Eastern Ukraine fell under Russian imperial rule by the late 17th century, much earlier than Western Ukraine. This explains why, after the fall of the Soviet Union, people in the east continued to support more Russian-leaning politicians. On the other hand, western Ukraine spent centuries under the

shifting control of European powers like Poland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The western third of Ukraine was even part of Poland for several years leading up to World War II. That explains why people in the west have tended to support more western leaning politicians. The east tends to be more Russian-speaking and Orthodox, with parts of the west more Ukrainian-speaking and with heavier catholic influence.

Again, it is important to note that under the reign of Catherine II, the steppe areas of eastern Ukraine became major economic centers of coal and iron. The Ukrainian language-speaking in rural areas - was twice banned by decree of the Tsar. In explaining further why the sense of Ukrainian nationalism is not as deep in the east as in the west, it should be remembered that in the early 1930s, to force peasants into joining collective farms, Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin orchestrated a famine that resulted in the starvation and death of millions of Ukrainians. Afterward, he (Stalin) imported large members of Russians and other Soviet citizens, many with no ability to speak Ukrainian with other few ties to the region to help repopulate the east.

6. Conclusion

It can easily be concluded that the contemporary language politics in Ukraine can be analyzed as a field of political battle for the right to use a new political language: the language of democratic values and human rights. Language politics can be seen as fight for symbolic power, a competition of different interpretation of the key values of democracy.

Evidently today, Ukraine is a bilingual country. Despite all the historical transformations, the changes of political system

and of state borders, despite significant progress made by the Ukrainian language and despite the efforts of twenty-three years of independence, the contemporary situation in a way reproduces the old pattern from the beginning of the 20th century. There are two dimensions in the language split: a regional division between western and eastern Ukraine and a social division between the urban and rural populations. There is, however, no gainsaying the fact that ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians in Ukraine basically understand each other. Language does not divide the residents of Ukraine. They believe that the role of the government in guiding language usage is at best ephemeral and that the progress of Ukraine towards a Ukrainophone environment continues the path that was started in the late 1980s, despite a relatively authoritarian and unhelpful regime in Kiev. It is obvious that the Russophone Ukrainians prefer today's ambiguity, which *de facto* allows them to use only Russian in their work without any sanctions for ignoring or even deriding publicly the so-called *state language*.

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