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CHOOSING THE STANDARD UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE: SPEAKERS AT THE GEOGRAPHICAL CROSSWAY

Abstract

The process of reforming Ukrainian standard language is related to the coexistence of two historically developed variants of the Ukrainian standard - Eastern and Western. Before Ukraine became an independent state, Ukrainian language policy encouraged the use of the Eastern standard, which is closer to Russian. This Eastern variant was reflected in standard vocabulary and grammar. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Western variant of the language, which had evolved by the first half of the 20 century on the territory, which was a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, is now considered the more prestigious one. Not only researchers and editors of dictionaries and grammars are elaborating of a new Ukrainian standard, but also common speakers are discussing language elements in line with 'folk purism' (by analogy with 'folk etymology').

Keywords: standard Ukrainian language, folk purism, language policy

1. Introduction

This article focuses on some problems of contemporary Ukrainian standard language, Ukrainian language policy and the way in which common speakers perceive and influence the process of standard language reformation.

2. Methods

The analysis of the language material was done using the method of continuous sampling in the Ukrainian Internet forums. The first step was to choose the most active forums that touch the question of the language norm, language purity and standard reformation. The second step was to analyze the dynamics of the discussion and speakers' ideological viewpoint: West Ukrainian variant oriented or East Ukrainian variant oriented.

3. Discussion

Since 1991, after becoming an independent state, Ukraine has changed its language policy. Now Ukrainian language has become the only official (state) language; the other minority languages sometimes do and sometimes do not have a special regional status, and that is a prominent change compared to the situation in the Ukrainian SSR where two languages – Russian and Ukrainian – had the official status[1].

The two former official languages reflected the real language usage, as Ukrainian people are usually bilingual with one preferred language – mostly Ukrainian or Russian – for everyday communication.

According to the survey conducted by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology in 2003, current situation in language usage is following:

Figure 1. Preferable language of day-to-day communication in Ukraine

Figure 1. shows parts where:
- yellow – Ukrainian is the preferable language of day-to-day communication
- light green – Russian is used a bit more often than Ukrainian (46% to 32%)
- dark green – Russian is the preferable language of day-to-day communication.

It has been some time since the survey was conducted but the language situation has not undergone serious changes. However we must admit that – although very slowly - the number of Ukrainian speakers is growing each decade.

In 1994 the Ukrainian standard language was declared strongly russified and in need of urgent reformation. That was the moment when the Orthography Reformation Committee began its work that was paused in 2003.

The language situation in Ukraine is aggravated by the fact that there are two regional variants of the Ukrainian language – Eastern and Western – that have a number of differences,

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[1] According to the 2012 act "On the principles of the state language policy", the State guarantees constitutional protection to any language spoken in Ukraine and any language in areas of Ukraine where the percentage of representatives of national minorities exceeds 10% of the total population of a defined administrative district and the status of a "regional language" so that it can be used officially in courts, schools and other government institutions. However in February 2014 there was an attempt to repeal the law but the repeal bill is still not signed although not vetoed, its current status is "ready for signature" (by the President).

primarily in lexis. Also there are several strong Ukrainian diasporas, first of all in the USA and Canada (but also in Brazil), originating mostly from Western Ukraine. Therefore, for many people now, the Western variant is the more 'native' one due to the fact that it is 'further' from Russian and has preserved some of its older characteristics, while the Eastern variant is perceived as strongly russified. However during the Soviet period the Eastern variant was the more prestigious one and it became the basis for the construction of the literary language in the 1930s.

So the newly formed Orthography Reformation Committee in 1994 faced several big and serious problems:

- firstly, they needed to reform the standard language so that it would become more 'contemporary', i.e. it would meet the needs of day-to-day communication better

- secondly, they needed to create a literary form that could reflect both the Eastern and the Western variants of the language

- thirdly, the standard had to reflect not only the Ukrainian language in Ukraine but also that of the diasporas in Americas.

After several years of work the Committee worked out a new orthography project that tried to achieve all of the aforementioned aims. The process of reformatting the literary language caused the so-called language discussion in the society on every level. The new variant of 1999 appeared to be very controversial. It was too innovative for Ukrainian speakers from the East although acceptable (and even advisable) for the Western and diaspora speakers. Still, some publishing houses and common speakers use it for their needs. The others use the official orthography of 2012 that is very similar to the Soviet variant.

However, the orthography reformation was only the first step in the process. The second step was the reformation of vocabulary. Before, many words and idioms were deemed unliterary (dialectal, archaic, colloquial etc.) but now their status has changed. Especially that is important for Western Ukrainian vocabulary, which is rather close to the West Slavic languages (especially Polish), e.g. *пательня – patelnia, шпальта – szpalta, шкіц – szkic, кнайпа – knajpa* etc. This tendency was parallel to diverging as far away as possible from Russian even despite the close relation of both languages.

Thus in today's Ukrainian language not only language variants have different levels of prestige but also words, grammatical forms and even spelling variants, e.g.

сковорода – пательня
фотографія – світлина
машина – авто
річ у тому – річ у тім
буду писати – писатиму
Вашингтон – Вашинґтон
Хемінгуей – Гемінґвей

Many of preferred forms originate from Western regions and sometimes are the effect of Ukrainian and Polish language contacts. From common speakers these forms go into mass media, literature and school books, and thus they are incorporated into education and become more familiar for children and teens. Thus a new generation of speakers is emerging.

All of this concerns not only literary language in its usual sphere – mass communication. Another aspect of Western orientation (as speakers understand it, of course) is its influence on the colloquial language. In Ukraine there are a lot of dialectal and regional language groups that

sometimes are very different from each other. In that continuum of language characteristics, the further to the west the better, is what people believe. Since Eastern dialects are perceived as surzhyk (a colloquial mix of Russian and Ukrainian) and as such have low level of prestige, Western dialects are becoming a source of 'native' language elements, not only for more or less official communication but also for everyday communication e.g. on the Internet people are less likely to criticize colloquialisms originating from Western dialects than those originating from the East.

Surfing on the Net one can come across many examples of discussions such as the following (this one was found in a forum thread dedicated to correct spelling and word usage). In the previous posts speakers criticized word usage on street signs, menus, advertisements etc. – in different public spheres. Most of the criticized words were called Russian or surzhyk and thus incorrect.

Later the discussion turns to the word *пательня* ('frying pan') in the restaurant menu.

1: Тобто до слова «пательня» питань нема?
So, you don't see any problem with this 'patelnja' word?

Then the second speaker gives a link to the article on *пательня* in Wikipedia, which proves that this word really exists in Ukrainian.

3: У деяких регіонах використовується діалектний варіант 'пательня', літературною формою є слово сковорода та похідні від нього. (вікі)

In some regions they use a dialectal word 'patelnja', the literary form is the word 'skovoroda' and its derivatives. (wiki)

So here the third speaker says that there are two words with similar meaning. But the literary word 'skovoroda' sounds the same as in Russian and thus causes a critical attitude:

4: Не знаю ніяких 'сковородів'. Пательня і всьо.
I don't know any 'skovorodas'. It's patelnia, and that's that.

So here the fourth speaker does not want to hear anything about the word 'skovoroda'.

5: Або рондель.
Or 'rondel'.

The fifth speaker finds another word with the same meaning, a dialectal one too.

6: В тернопільському ресторані не приймаються претензії до слова «пательня». Мають право на місцеві діалектизми. Не порівняти із дійсно неграмотним …

At a Ternopil restaurant they don't listen to complaints about the word 'patelnja'. They have a right to use local dialects. It can't be compared to the illiterate…

and they go on discussing other words.

As one can see, in this example speakers allow others to use non-standard words but only if those words originate from Western Ukrainian dialects. Elements of colloquial speech originating from other regions are deemed Russian or surzhyk even if they are not, and even if dictionaries and grammar books state them as actually Ukrainian, because speakers believe their own language sense more than other (even the most reliable) sources.

4. Conclusion

The tendency of consciously changing the Ukrainian language standard towards more Western language elements is not the only one observed in contemporary Ukrainian but one of the most prominent ones that involves not only linguists, politicians and authorities but also

common speakers and gives them a lot of room for creativity. The idea of Western orientation in norm reformation makes Ukrainian speakers very aware of any potential changes in the language structure. In opinion of some of them the idea 'the further to the West the better' is the true nature of the standard language reformation, while Eastern language elements are sometimes perceived as surzhyk, or a colloquial mix of Russian and Ukrainian.

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