Language Revitalization in Ukraine: Geo-Culturally Determined Success

ANDREW MCKISHNIE
University of Victoria

ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the successes and struggles of the ongoing language revitalization effort in Ukraine. Since the breakup of the USSR in 1991, many policies have been implemented in an effort to promote 'ukrainianization' of the country, which has resulted in mixed success (Pavlenko 2006). Today, more of the population is speaking Ukrainian, although this is not a phenomenon that is evenly distributed across the country; rather, the success of ukrainianization has been 'geo-culturally determined'; that is, the success of ukrianianization can be determined by the cultural climate of any given geographical area. The paper attempts to demonstrate this by giving a historical outline of language in the USSR, discussing ukrainianization efforts after independence, and speculating on and future directions of ukrainianization as it pertains to three geographic regions: Western Ukraine (i.e. Lviv), Kiev and Crimea.
Keywords: Language Revitalization; Ukrainian; Russian; post-Soviet language policy

1   Introduction

The last twenty-five years caused the status and use of Ukraine's language, Ukrainian, to undergo significant changes. Up until 1991, Ukraine was a part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (henceforth USSR or the Soviet Union), in which Russian was the *de facto* state language (Pavlenko 2006). The Soviet Union's non-Russian languages were not treated as possessing equal status, and were typically seen as "the language of the 'lower' strata of society (caretakers, maids, unskilled labourers, newly hired workers [from the village], rank and file workers, especially in the suburbs)" (Krouglov 2002: 229). Upon independence, Ukraine declared Ukrainian the only state language of Ukraine and implemented many policies with the intention of spreading the use of Ukrainian, often referred to as 'ukrainianization' policies (Pavlenko 2006). These policies have been extremely successful in some areas of the country, while they have had much more limited success in others. The major factors that contribute to a lack of success in some areas include the fact that Russian still has high status as a business language with Ukraine's largest neighbour. Additionally, knowledge of Russian gives Ukrainians access to Russian media, of which there is a much larger amount than Ukrainian media. Finally, some areas of the country have a very large number of people that are not ethnically Ukrainian, but actually ethnically Russian, such as Crimea (Krouglov 2002).

This paper will first give a historical outline of language policies in the USSR, followed by a discussion of some issues faced by 'ukrainianization' efforts, and will conclude with some thoughts as to the future of the Ukrainian language in various areas of the Ukraine, with the intention of demonstrating that the success or 'ukrainianization' seems to be determined 'geo-culturally'; that is, the success of linguistic 'ukrainianization' efforts in any given geographical area strongly relates to the geographical area's cultural makeup.

2   Background Information

'Language revitalization' is a term to describe efforts that are undertaken by some type of authoritative body to reverse a language's decline. This is typically thought of as something pertinent only to languages with a very small number of speakers (*i.e.* First Nations' languages in North America), although its concepts can be applied to larger languages as well. While many early steps of Fishman's (1991) model of language revitalization were not applicable to the revitalization of Ukrainian, many of the later steps were, including the following:

1. Where the state permits it, and where numbers warrant, encourage the use of the language in compulsory state education.
2. Where the above stages have been achieved and consolidated, encourage the use of the language in the workplace (lower work sphere).
3. Where the above stages have been achieved and consolidated encourage the use of the language in local government services and mass media.
4. Where the above stages have been achieved and consolidated encourage use of the language in higher education, government etc.

The Ukrainian language has long marked Ukrainian identity as a way to separate itself from the much larger (in terms of population) and, at times, politically dominant Russian culture. However, throughout its history, Ukraine has been a multiethnic nation (Yekelchyk 2007). The recent history of Ukrainian can be divided into three eras: Early Soviet times, mid to late-Soviet times, and post-Soviet times. Much of this has to do with the Soviet Union's linguistic policies regarding the use of the Russian language, which, for most of the Soviet era, was highly encouraged, while the using regional minority languages (which Ukrainian was one of) was discouraged. Some background on the region of Crimea is also given, as it will receive special attention in the following investigation.

2.1   Ukrainian in the early Soviet Union

When the USSR was created in 1922, multilingualism was encouraged throughout the USSR. The rationale of Lenin was that it would be easier to communicate and have people accept Soviet ideals if they were able to hear them in their native languages (Pavlenko 2006). This resulted in a wave of

government-supported efforts to develop tools for these minority languages, such as developing orthographies for languages which had none, encouraging literacy and education, as well as translating a lot of world literature into these minority languages. Pavlenko (2006: 81) refers to these policies as the early USSR's 'pluralist policies'- the policies that were made to accommodate people of various national, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in the new USSR.

2.2 Ukrainian in the Soviet Era

Language policies changed dramatically after leadership transferred from the then late Lenin to Joseph Stalin in 1924 (Pavlenko 2006). The goal of the policies did an 180° turn, changing from encouraging pluralism and ethnic identities towards assimilation into the Russian culture. This is a process commonly referred to as 'russification' (Pavlenko 2006). Russification was first encouraged among social and political elites, but soon spread throughout all strata of the population in many Soviet states (Pavlenko 2006), causing discrimination and oppression of minority languages. The countries in which Russification proceeded most thoroughly were Belarus and Ukraine, most likely due to three major factors; first, their close proximity to the major Russian political centres of Leningrad (modern-day St. Petersburg), and Moscow; second, the linguistic similarity between Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian; and third, the fact that these three cultures were the most closely related, sharing among many other things, a common religion (Orthodox Christianity). The local Ukrainian and Belarussian languages became to be seen as 'inferior' or 'less sophisticated' languages than Russian, and knowledge of Russian became associated with academic and economic success. As a result, large parts of the population in these countries shifted towards the use of Russian in much of their daily lives. This was most notably seen in the education system, when in 1938 a decree made Russian an obligatory subject in all Soviet schools. A centralized curriculum ensured that a high level of proficiency was achieved by all those educated in the Soviet Union (Pavlenko 2006). This was also a period when the Russian language underwent a large amount of standardization. Smith (1998: 145) captures this when he writes that "Abandoning the earlier debates and experiments, they now demanded conservative standards to bring the classroom up to Russian rather than Russian down to it." The heavy promotion of Russian resulted in a decline in the use of minority languages throughout the Soviet Union.

2.3 Ukrainian in the Post-Soviet Era

When the Soviet Union dissolved in the early 1990's, Ukraine's language policy shifted dramatically. Previously, Russian had been promoted so heavily and given such a high status that many people in the Ukraine preferred Russian as a language of everyday communication, particularly in central and eastern

Ukraine (Krouglov 2002). One factor that may have contributed was that at the time of independence, about 25% of the country's citizens were ethnically Russian (Pavlenko 2006). Despite Ukraine's large Russian-speaking population Ukrainian became the sole state language in Ukraine (Krouglov 2002). However, many areas of the country continue to use Russian as an everyday language, most notably in the capital city, Kiev, and in Crimea, an autonomous republic in the south of Ukraine. There were some problems with the government's early 'ukrainianization' efforts of the education system most notably the lack of teachers competent to teach in Ukrainian, and many teaching materials in Ukrainian were vastly inferior to those produced in Russian (Krouglov 2002). Even as late as 2001, after a decade of the new 'ukrainianization' movements, 46% of the population was in favour of making Russian a second official language (Krouglov 2002).

2.4   Crimea in Ukraine

Crimea is a peninsula in southern Ukraine that juts out into the Black Sea. It has long been a contested piece of land, but it was a part of Russia until the Soviet leader Nikita Khruschev gave the peninsula as a gift to the Ukrainian SSR on February 19, 1954 (Volvach 2011). However, the majority of the inhabitants were, and remain to this day, ethnically Russian, with about 58% of the population being ethnic Russians according to the census in 2001 (Uehling 2011). Despite that Ukrainian has been the sole state language in the Ukraine since 1991, many people still feel that Ukrainian will never become the majority language in Crimea. One Russian leader said, "What kind of rebirth of Ukrainian language can there be if there was never a basis of Ukrainian culture here in Crimea? It's contrived" (Uehling 2011: 157). Almost everyone in the region uses Russian as an everyday language of work, media, and private life (Pavlenko 2006).

3   Issues in Revitalization of Ukrainian

After independence from the USSR in 1991, the first step in the language revitalization process that needed to be taken by leaders was that of status planning - first by undoing the status planning that had been put in place by the Soviet leaders regarding Russian, as well as providing a means by which to increase the status of the Ukrainian language (Krouglov 2002). The first step taken in raising the status of Ukrainian was the decision to make Ukrainian the sole state language of the newly formed country. However, this took a while to take hold in people's private lives, where many people had become accustomed to using Russian. Another major step in promoting Ukrainian was that of corpus planning; this was the first time that there had been a need for Ukrainian to become 'standardized', and the large advancements in technology that had taken place over the last few decades required many new terms to be added to the

Ukrainian language, or at least to have one standard form chosen (Krouglov 2002). This is an example of the corpus planning that occurred in Ukraine. Ukrainian was used in the nationalist movements that were sweeping the country, as the Ukrainian language became a symbol for independent Ukraine, while Russian was the symbol of a time of oppression. As much as this seems like an ideal situation in which to revitalize a language, with a large number of speakers and the language being a symbol of national unity in a newly formed country, several factors hindered the growth of the Ukrainian language, most notably a lack of proficiency in Ukrainian by important Ukrainian figures, as well as some geographical areas that many of the inhabitants did not identify with Ukrainian culture.

3.1   *Lack of Ukrainian Proficiency: Surzhyk and Kiev*

One major obstacle that hindered the spread of the Ukrainian language was that many of the government officials who were making these 'ukrainianization' policies were themselves not fully fluent in the Ukrainian language (Krouglov 2002). In fact, many government officials and members of parliament are the target of ridicule based on the way that they speak the Ukrainian language. This has led to a phenomenon which Krouglov (2002: 229) refers to as 'Ukrainophobia': the reluctance of Russophones to use the Ukrainian language for fear of making a mistake associated with negative social connotations. Currently, many government officials use 'Surzhyk'; a mixed language that draws from both the Russian and Ukrainian languages. This is a result of the fact that many government officials are Russophones, a remnant of Soviet language policy where the Russian language was considered "the language of the 'higher', 'more educated' strata of society" (Krouglov 2002: 229). Surzhyk carries strongly negative connotations, as it has been referred to as a 'language illness' whose use should be militated against by Ukrainian linguists (Krouglov 2002: 228). There seems to be a certain amount of hypocrisy involved in the making of the language policies; many people who are supposed to be promoting the use of Ukrainian and discouraging the use of Russian prefer to use Russian. The many business ties between the Ukraine and Russia (despite political autonomy) contribute to the continued use of Russian. Thus, it remains a very practical choice for one to speak the Russian language, and many areas in Kiev are primarily Russian-speaking, thereby further reducing the need for one to speak Ukrainian in those areas.

3.2   *Lack of Identification with Ukrainian Culture: Crimea*

A major roadblock to the revitalization of Ukrainian in the Crimea is a very simple concept that gives rise to extremely complex issues: only 25% of the inhabitants are ethnic Ukrainians, with over 60% of the population being ethnically Russian (MacKinnon 2004). As a result, many of the people fail to

identify with Ukrainian culture at all, and rather identify with Russian culture. This has prevented the 'ukrainianization' movement from taking any hold; in fact, some members of the community even vehemently oppose being part of the Ukrainian country; many wish that their land was reunited with Russia politically as it once was (MacKinnon 2004). Some take this sentiment so far as to suggest that Ukraine acquired the Crimean peninsula from Russia under somewhat questionable circumstances, suggesting that the Soviet leader Nikita Khruschev was intoxicated when he transferred Crimea from the Russian Federal Soviet Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic when both were part of the USSR (MacKinnon 2004). While this claim is most likely false, it nonetheless captures the feelings of many Crimeans who think that Crimea is Russian territory. Ever since Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union, Crimea, which does have a slight amount of political autonomy from the rest of Ukraine, has attempted to pass pro-Russian legislation, such as setting all clocks to match the time in the Russian capital of Moscow, most of which has been subsequently vetoed by the Ukrainian federal government (MacKinnon 2004). During the Ukrainian Presidential election in 2004, there were many rallies in Simferopol, the Crimean capital, supporting candidate Viktor Yanukovich, whose platform included strengthening the ties between Ukraine and Russia, even so far as calling for the Russian language to be made the second official language of Ukraine (MacKinnon 2004). Many people at these rallies showed their support for Yanukovich by waving the Russian flag, which many consider to be much more of a symbol of the region than the Ukrainian flag (MacKinnon 2004). Viktor Afanasayev, an official from the pro-Russian political party in Ukraine, captures the sentiment of many Crimean people when he says that "We are, and have always been part of Russia, if not legally, then culturally and in our souls. Whenever I go to Moscow, I don't say that I'm from Ukraine, I say I'm from Crimea" (MacKinnon 2004).

4   The Future of the Ukrainian Language in Ukraine

Language revitalization efforts in Ukraine have, overall, had some success. However, that success is not seen across the country, but rather in limited geographical areas. This section will explore the future of the Ukrainian language, first in Ukraine as a whole, followed by a discussion of two predominately Russian-speaking areas, the capital city Kiev and the region of Crimea.

4.1   Future of Ukrainian in Western Ukraine

In Western Ukraine, Ukrainian has long been the predominant language, with 91.6% of the inhabitants of Western Ukraine reporting Ukrainian as their preferred language of communication, as opposed to just 43.9% for the rest of the country (Krouglov 2002). If anything, these numbers will have increased since

the policies promoting 'ukrainianization' were implemented, since the nationalist feelings are very strong in this area of Ukraine (MacKinnon 2004). Traditionally, Western Ukraine has maintained the use of the Ukrainian language (Pavlenko 2006). This may due partly due to the fact that this area of the country has had far less contact with Russian language and culture, since during the 17th century the Eastern part of Ukraine was under Russian tsarist rule, while the Western area of the country was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire (Krouglov 2002: 223). Additionally, the population of Western Ukraine is generally more rural and less dense than the rest of the country. As such, it is more likely that the language perceived as a 'folk' language (Krouglov 2002) will be prevalent in this part of the country. Therefore, it is fairly safe to say that Ukrainian will continue to spread into all areas of life, and Western Ukraine will continue to be the stronghold of the Ukrainian language in the country.

4.2   The Future of Ukrainian in Kiev

Surprisingly, the area of Ukraine in which the Ukrainian language is most in danger, outside of the Crimea, is the capital city of Kiev. As a major business centre, it continues to have strong economic ties to Moscow, and most residents prefer to use Russian at work and at home, and also tend to consume more Russian media than Ukrainian media (Pavlenko 2006). A 2002 study by Marshall examined the language utilization patterns of youth in Kiev. The study sampled students of various ages, with 52% being students at Ukrainian schools, and 48% being students at Russian schools (Marshall 2002). The first noticeable stat reported that 68% of all students in the sample reported Russian as their first language, with 5% claiming both Ukrainian and Russian as native languages. These figures indicate that the Russian language is predominant in this area and that the Ukrainian language is a minority language in this context. The next part of the survey included some information on which language students preferred to use in various situations. These stats look even grimmer for the Ukrainian language, with 85% of students preferring the Russian language for use in casual conversation among friends (Marshall 2002). This points to the higher status of Russian in the area, since the proportion of students preferring to use Russian is higher than the proportion of those that reported Russian as their native language. However, when the data was analyzed more closely, Marshall (2002) did find some encouraging results, which indicated that 'ukrainianization' efforts are beginning to have some success in Kiev. Within the context of casual speech among friends, grades 9-11 students preferred Russian 90% of the time, grades 5-8 preferred Russian 89% of the time, and grades 2-4 students preferred Russian 76% of the time. This apparent time analysis suggests a decline in Russian use with the use of Ukrainian increasing.

4.3   The Future of Ukrainian in Crimea

Crimea probably has the worst outlook for the Ukrainian language. Policies that were supposed to promote 'ukrainianization' and Ukrainian nationalism have actually had the opposite effect, promoting somewhat of a separatist movement, with many of the inhabitants wishing to become a part of Russia once again (MacKinnon 2004). The fact that so few of the people in Crimea are ethnically Ukrainian, with the majority being ethnically Russian, is likely largely to blame for the lack of success of 'ukrainianization' efforts (MacKinnon 2004). Many people in Crimea feel that the imposition of Ukrainian as the sole state language is a denial of their language rights, since native Russian speakers to this day make up a significant proportion of not only the people in this region, but also about 30% of the entire Ukrainian population (Krouglov 2002). This identification with Russian culture, as well as some resentment towards the 'ukrainianization' policies, indicates that the spread of Ukrainian will not proceed in Crimea nearly as successfully as it has in many other parts of the country, most notably the Western and Central areas (Krouglov 2002).

5   Conclusion

This paper has investigated the language revitalization of the Ukrainian language since 1991. It provided a historical outline as to how Ukrainian came to be a language in need of revitalization, followed by a discussion of the breakthroughs and shortcomings of these 'ukrainianization' efforts. In the Western and Central areas of Ukraine, where efforts have been most successful, this is caused by a strong identity that the people have with Ukrainian culture and nationality. In Eastern and Southern Ukraine, where efforts have been much less successful, this is due to Russian still having a strong influence in many spheres of peoples' lives, including business and education, as well as that many people in these parts of Ukraine identify more strongly with Russian culture than they do with Ukrainian. Although education in Ukrainian is on the rise, Krouglov (2002) notes that many students in Ukrainian schools still prefer to use Russian as a language of communication in informal and non-classroom settings. Nevertheless, the 'ukrainianizaition' efforts have overall been successful, with language being used as a tool in constructing a new national identity. I refer to this success as geo-culturally determined, since the most important factors that determine the success (or lack thereof) of 'ukrainianization' efforts seem to be the cultural climate of any given geographical area.

REFERENCES

Fishman, Joshua. 1991. *Reversing language Shift: Theory and Practice of Assistance to Threatened Languages.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Krouglov, Alexander. 2002. War and Peace: Ukrainian and Russian in Ukraine. *Journal of Language and Politics.* 1:2, 221-239.

MacKinnon, Mark. 2004. Crimea has eyes only for Russia. *The Globe and Mail*. Toronto: Dec. 4, p. A.11.

Marshall, Camelot Ann. 2002. Post-Soviet Language Policy and the Language Utilization Patterns of Kyivan Youth. *Language Policy.* 1:3, 237-260.

Pavlenko, Aneta. 2006. Russian as a Lingua Franca. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics.* 26, 78-99.

Smith, Michael G. 1998. *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR, 1917-1953.* New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Uehling, Greta. 2004. The First Independent Ukrainian Census in Crimea: Myths, Miscoding and Missed Opportunities. *Ethnic and Racial Identities*. 27:1, 149-170.

Volvach, Petro. 2011. 'Podarunok Xrushova'. Yak Ukrayina vidbuduvala Krym ('Kruschev's Gift'. How Ukraine rebuilt Crimea). *Ukrayinska Pravda (Ukrainian Truth)*. Simferopol: Feb. 21, Istorichna Pravda (Historical Truth).

Yekelchyk, Serhy. 2007. *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press.