

Ukrainian language in Canada: From prosperity to extinction?

Khrystyna Hudyma
University of Saskatchewan

In this paper I want to explore in what way and due to what factors the Ukrainian language in Canada evolved from being a mother tongue for one of the biggest country's ethnic groups to just an ethnic language hardly spoken by younger generations. Ukrainian was brought to the country by peasant settlers from Western Ukraine at the end of the 19th century; therefore, it is one of the oldest heritage languages in Canada. Three subsequent waves of Ukrainian immigration supplied language retention; however had their own language-related peculiarities.

Initially, the Ukrainian language in Canada differed from standard Ukrainian, with the pace of time and under influence of the English language they diverged even more. Profound changes on phonetic, lexical and grammatical levels allow some scholars to consider Canadian Ukrainian an established dialect of standard Ukrainian.

Once one of the best maintained mother tongues in Canada, today Ukrainian experiences a significant drop in number of native speakers and use at home, as well as faces a persistent failure of transmission to the next generation. Although, numerous efforts are made to maintain Ukrainian in Canada, i.e. bilingual schools, summer camps, university courses, the young generation of Ukrainian Canadians learn it as a foreign language and limit its use to family and school settings. Such tendency fosters language shift and puts Canadian Ukrainian on the brink of extinction in the nearest future.

1 Introduction

The first records of immigrants arriving from the territory of modern Ukraine to Canada go back to 1892, and thus, have more than a century of history. The reasons that made people leave their homelands changed over time; however, the problems most of them faced remain almost the same. As long as they were speakers of a language other than English, they always faced the dilemma of language maintenance.

According to statistics, the Ukrainian ethnic minority was quite successful in preserving their culture, traditions and language. Until recently, Ukrainian Canadians had one of the lowest rates of mixed ethnic marriages and one of the

highest percentages of mother tongue speakers among the ethnic communities in Canada (Sekirin, 1994; Struk, 2000). However, last decades have shown a rapid decline in native speakers of Ukrainian. According to Danylo Struk (2000), one of the main reasons is that the language has ceased to be an ethnic identifier. Ukrainian dancing, wedding ceremony, and a different calendar have become the main identifiers of Ukrainian ethnicity.

2 Historic Background

In order to better understand changes Ukrainian undergoes in Canada it is important to examine in detail the dynamics and history of Ukrainian immigration to Canada.

More than 300,000 Ukrainians from different regions of Ukraine, of different cultural and educational background have arrived in Canada from 1892 (Swyripa, 1999; Kostyuk, 2007). They immigrated in four different waves, each of which had its own peculiarities.

The first wave of Ukrainian immigration to Canada started in the 1890s and lasted until the beginning of World War I in 1914. Most of the new settlers were illiterate peasants from the western Ukrainian regions of Galicia and Bukovina in the Austro-Hungarian Empire looking for new lands and better economic conditions. Thus, these immigrants concentrated in the parkland belt of the Prairie Provinces – Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (Swyripa, 1999; Hryniuk, 1991; Lehr, 1991).

The second wave of immigration occurred during the inter-war years. It brought 68,000 people, primarily peasants from western Ukrainian territories, by then part of Poland and Romania (Swyripa, 1999). The main flow of immigrants continued to come from Bukovina and Galicia. In addition, for the first time, immigrants began to arrive from Volyn, which also became a part of Poland. Most of the immigrants were still farmers, the unskilled and semi-skilled, who were being pushed out of their homeland by the bleak economic and political future which they faced. They still sought land in Canada, but the good homesteads were gone, and they had to choose between free land, which was poor or too far from settlement, or better land at a price. However, the second wave immigration group also included domestic workers, political refugees and members of the Ukrainian army which had been fighting against Poland and the Russian Communists. The pull of non-farm jobs was increasing and more and more new immigrants were drawn to Canadian cities and towns (Martynovych, 1991; Marunchak, 1982).

The third wave lasted for five post-war years, from 1947 to 1952 (Swyripa, 1999). These settlers were mostly displaced persons, many of whom had been taken from homes in Ukraine to work as slave labourers in Germany. When the war ended they did not want to return to their homes because of the Soviet

takeover of Ukraine. These immigrants included skilled workers, professionals, scientists and musicians. For the most part they tended to settle in the urban centres (Marunchak, 1982).

The fourth wave of Ukrainian immigration to Canada has started after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This group consists of qualified professionals who settled for the most part in big cities of Eastern Canada (Kostyuk, 2007). In comparison to the first three waves, this group has thus far been the smallest numerically. Furthermore, while immigrants from the first three waves tended to settle in homogeneous clusters, both urban and rural, the latest Ukrainian newcomers to Canada choose predominantly to live in urban centres. These factors facilitate losing their ethnic identity in general and rapid language shift in particular (Holmes, 1992).

3 Statistical Data Regarding Present State of Ukrainian in Canada

Canada 2006 Census shows that there were an estimated 1,209,085 persons of Ukrainian origin (3,9% of population) residing in Canada (mainly Canadian-born citizens), making them Canada's ninth largest ethnic group, and giving Canada the world's third-largest Ukrainian population behind Ukraine itself and Russia. However, the number of Ukrainian speaking population is much lower. In 2001, there were about 147,400 speakers of Ukrainian in Canada. Provincially, the largest Ukrainian speaking population resides in Ontario (about 48,620). Ukrainophones there, however, are a small percentage of the population, while on the Prairies the percentage is much higher (Alberta – 1.15%, Manitoba – 2.4%, Saskatchewan – 2.04%). Very few Ukrainian speakers are present in both Atlantic and Northern Canada. Even more troubling is the “rate of language shift” indicator (i.e., the rate at which a person switches from using the mother tongue to using the majority language). Ukrainian has the rate of 76.5%, exceeded only by Dutch (87.2%). Germans (71.2%), Italians (50.6%), Poles (37.9%) and all the other nationalities have a smaller rate with Chinese at 15.5% being the lowest (Struk, 2000).

According to statistics, from 1961 to 2006 the Ukrainian language in Canada experienced a rapid decline in native speakers (from 361,496 in 1961 to 134,505 in 2006). In terms of routine family use at home, Ukrainian is also marginal, although there are some recent developments. According to Canada 1996 Census, 49,985 individuals identified Ukrainian as the language used routinely at home, whereas in 2001 the number soared to 67,665, however declining more than by half in 2006. The reason for such rapid growth might be in the fact that at the turn of the 21st Century mass immigration from Ukraine gathered pace, thereby facilitating the increase in numbers of individuals using Ukrainian language at home. A sharp decrease might be explained by the fact that Ukrainian newcomers tend to settle in big urban areas and are more inclined

to assimilate, and, therefore, the process of language shift may be completed even within one generation. Another factor contributing to the decline of Ukrainian language use at home is the fact that the last post-war wave of Ukrainian-speaking immigrants has largely disappeared as a significant statistical category, whereas their children and grandchildren show no interest in retaining the heritage language (Sekirin, 1994). Thus, over the last twenty years, the number of young people speaking Ukrainian has decreased dramatically. For instance, among young generation of Canadian Ukrainians, between the ages of 15 and 20 years, only 20% wish to maintain their mother tongue, and 78% prefer to speak English or French (Pendakur, 1990). Among the Ukrainian youth, only 13% in Montreal and 17% in Toronto wish Ukrainian to be their home language (Sekirin, 1994).

This decrease can be explained by the fact that now fourth and fifth-generation Ukrainians have developed in Canada. These young people do not have a strong commitment to the Ukrainian language. Furthermore, the percentage of young Ukrainians who are ready to create a mixed ethnic couple rose from 17% to 73% over the last 30 years. Moreover, only one-fourth of Ukrainian mothers in Canada pass on their mother tongue to their children (Kralt, 1991). Ukrainians born in Canada are, slowly and surely, coming to think and feel like Canadians (Sekirin, 1994).

4 Differences between standard Ukrainian and Canadian Ukrainian

The speakers of a minority language are always facing the influence of a dominant one, and a shift towards the majority language often happens within 3 generations (Fishman, 1989). The Ukrainian minority has so far resisted full assimilation into Canadian society. Nevertheless, the influence of English and of other social factors on the Ukrainian community has caused language change (Sekirin, 1994). However, it is worth noticing that Ukrainian brought to Canada was not standard Ukrainian, and then the mainland and Canadian varieties diverged even further. The main differences between Standard Ukrainian and Canadian Ukrainian are the following:

1. Canadian Ukrainian evolved from south-western dialect of standard Ukrainian. Therefore, it has many Polish, German, and Romanian loanwords.
2. Canadian Ukrainian has considerably fewer Russian borrowings, when compared to standard Ukrainian.
3. Canadian Ukrainian has experienced strong influence of other languages used in Canada, especially of English.

Interference of the English language can be observed on different levels, namely on phonetic, lexical and syntactic.

Phonetic level of the Ukrainian language in Canada indicates a strong influence of the English phonetic system. Thus, several considerable changes can be singled out:

1. Ukrainian fricative glottal /ɦ/(/ʕ/) is usually substituted by /h/.
2. Both Ukrainian dental /l/ and /lʲ/ became English alveolar /l/.
3. Ukrainian dental plosives /d/, /t/ became corresponding English alveolar plosives.
4. Diphthongization of Ukrainian vowels.

Changes on the lexical level came to existence from the earliest years of Ukrainian settlement in Canada. Characteristic usage of English words but in Ukrainian manner gave name to the jargon of new immigrants. It was called Ukish, once a popular mixture of both Ukrainian and English languages, which gradually lost its significance, and is barely used today. Ukish was born to the fact that when the first Ukrainians came to Canada in the late 19th century they found themselves in a strange land with many elements of daily life which did not correspond to, or were different from what they knew (Struk 2000), therefore they borrowed English equivalents for naming different objects, but accommodated them into the rules of Ukrainian grammar. Thus, for example, all English borrowed nouns acquired the category of gender with corresponding gender-marking affixes (Sekirin 1994); they (nouns) were also changed according to number and case.

In 1965, Alexander Royick collected samples of classical Ukish in Alberta. As the selected examples from his work show English intrusions were absorbed into the Ukrainian language and acclimatized there (Rojick, 1965): Box -> [baksynky; baksy], Exhibition -> [atsybyshyn], Pie -> [paja], Buns -> [bansy], Cookies -> [kukisy], Train -> [tryna], Fight (v) -> [fajtuvatysja], Drive (v) -> [drajvuvaty], Farm (v) -> [farmaruvaty].

Although one can still hear this type of classical Ukish, it is becoming rare. As any living language Ukrainian in Canada is undergoing constant changes. Contemporary language, for instance, does not readily adopt English words into Ukrainian but brings lexical items in their English form (Struk, 2000):

- Ja dav tobi ti samples (instead of “sempli”)

- Os' mij file (instead of "mij fail" or "moja fajlja")

Changes on the lexical level of the Ukrainian language in Canada have also affected the category of naming. First Ukrainian settlers felt very uncomfortable with their Slavic names and surnames which gave away their foreignness and, therefore, tried to make them sound more like Anglo-Saxon ones. Several peculiarities in first name changing might be observed:

- Adopting English variants of Ukrainian Christian names (Ivan > John, Olena > Helen), or the closest sounding English names (Vasyl > William (not Basil))
- Translating of Ukrainian names into English (Slava > Glory, Liubov > Love, Vira > Faith)
- Diminutives become standard variants both of Ukrainian and English names (Nadia < Nadija, Olia < Olja, Mike < Michael).

Some Ukrainians also tried to modify their surnames for a better fit into the English system. They either completely changed the surname (full assimilation), e.g. Khibetskyi > Chilleyback; Shchur > Stewart, Borshch > Kennedy) or deleted one or several syllables, so that a surname would resemble English (partial assimilation). Partial assimilation occurred in different parts of the word (Zhuktenko 1990):

- Initial (Smerechanskyi > Chanski)
- Final (Bezkorovajnyi > Besko)
- Elimination of the middle part (Vavryniuk > Warnuk)

Interference of English on the syntactic level is also quite common. Speakers of Ukrainian usually copy English syntactic structures and fill them with Ukrainian words:

- Ja maju velyku pryjemnist ... (Canadian Ukrainian)
I have a great pleasure....
vs.
- Meni duzhe pryjemno ... (Standard Ukrainian)

- Ja duzhe vdovolena z mojim prizvyshchem. (Canadian Ukrainian)
I am very satisfied with my last name.
vs.
- Ja duzhe vdovolena svojim prizvyshchem. (Standard Ukrainian)

However, there is also a reverse process of Ukrainian language influencing English of Canadian Ukrainians, especially on the lexical level. Intrusion of Ukrainian words into English usually occurs when words relate to things particularly Ukrainian (Struk, 2000):

- I haven't seen you at zabava (*reception*) last night.
- How was the Malanka (*Ukrainian folk holiday*)?
- Our baba (*grandma*) is visiting us for Christmas.

Given the linguistic differences on phonetic, lexical and syntactic level between standard Ukrainian spoken in Ukraine and Ukrainian spoken in Canada, some scholars consider the latter to be an established dialect of the former (Zhuktenko, 1990).

5 Conclusion

Most of the Ukrainian diasporal history is linked with various attempts at language preservation – numerous bilingual schools of then and now, Saturday/Sunday schools, the persistent insistence of the community that knowing the language is of great importance. Despite the preoccupation with language retention there seems to have been and still is an enormous amount of confusion as to the desired result of language maintenance: was it to be an active skill, i.e., to be in daily and constant use, or was it to be just a “symbol of ethnic identity”? Therefore, having preserved its communicative role for more than a century Ukrainian language in Canada changed functionally (Struk 2000, Zhuktenko 1990). Irida Gerus-Tarnavetska (1984) noticed that for the majority of modern Ukrainian Canadians Ukrainian is not their mother tongue, but a foreign language, which is used on rare occasions. Studies have shown that where there is no home and school use of the language, all that can be learned of a language is useful only for group identification and such minimal knowledge is not only insufficient for active use but might not even survive transmission to the next generation (Struk 2000). Therefore, the present state of Ukrainian language indicates that within 100 years it went through a transition from being a “mother

tongue” for Canadian Ukrainians to becoming a “heritage language” barely spoken by a young generation and now is seriously endangered.

References

- Fishman, J. (1989). *Language and ethnicity in minority sociolinguistic perspective*, Clevedon, Avon, England, Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
- Gerus-Tarnavetska, I. (1984). *The Canadization of the Ukrainian Language*, New Soil and Old Roots. Ukrainian Experience in Canada, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba press.
- Holmes, J. (1992). *Introduction to Sociolinguistics (Learning about Language)*, London and New York: Longman.
- Hryniuk, S. (1991). 'Sifton Pets': *Who Were They?*, Canada's Ukrainians: Negotiating an Identity, ed. by Stella Hryniuk and Liubomyr Luciuk, University of Toronto Press.
- Kostyuk, S. (2007). *Canada and Saskatchewan through their Eyes: Survey of Recent immigrants from Ukraine*. Analytical Report, Sergius Press: Kyiv – Saskatoon.
- Kralt, J. (1991). *Ethnicity, Immigration and Language Transfer*, Ottawa, Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship.
- Lehr, J. (1991). *Peopling the Prairies with Ukrainians*, Canada's Ukrainians: Negotiating an Identity, ed. by Stella Hryniuk and Liubomyr Luciuk, University of Toronto Press.
- Martynowych, O. (1991). *Ukrainians in Canada: The Formative Period, 1891-1924*. Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press.
- Marunchak, M. (1982). *The Ukrainian Canadians: a history*, 2nd ed., Winnipeg and Ottawa.
- Pendakur, R. (1990). *Speaking in Tongues: Heritage Language Maintenance and Transfer in Canada*, Ottawa: Policy and Research, Multiculturalism Sector.
- Royik, A. (1965). *Lexical Borrowings in Alberta Ukrainian*, University of Alberta Press.
- Sekirin, P. (1994). *Endangered Dialect: Sociolinguistic Study of the Ukrainian Language in Canada*, Sociolinguistic Studies and Language Planning, Proceedings of the XVIth annual meeting of the Atlantic provinces linguistic association.
- Struk, D. (2000). *Between Ukish and Oblivion: The Ukrainian Language in Canada Today*. // www.utoronto.ca/elul/Struk-mem/Works/Between-Ukish.pdf, retrieved on February 10, 2011.

- Swyripa, F. (1999). *Ukrainians. Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples*. Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario
<http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/Encyclopedia/A-Z/u1>, retrieved on February 10, 2011.
- Zhluktenko, Y. (1990). *Ukrainska mova na linhvistychnij karti Kanady*, Kyiv: Naukova dumka.