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Ukrainian Citizens' Attitudes towards Surzhyk in Times of Russian Aggression

Abstract: The article explores the emotional attitudes of people living in Ukraine toward Surzhyk, the Ukrainian-Russian mixed code. An online survey was conducted in which respondents were asked to give their reactions to predefined statements that embody attitudes toward Surzhyk ranging from negative to neutral to positive. Some respondents provided additional comments, expressing in a more nuanced way their opinions on Surzhyk. Our findings represent the culmination of research on attitudes toward Surzhyk since the onset of Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022.

Keywords: Surzhyk, emotional attitudes of speakers, citizens of Ukraine

Introduction

The attitudes of Ukrainians toward the mixed Ukrainian-Russian code have historically been ambiguous. Upon Ukraine gaining independence in 1991, the language issue swiftly became a focal point of political contention, leading to societal divisions rather than unity. When the Constitution was adopted in 1996, the provision regarding the state language included the obligatory mention of the Russian language in Article 10: this, alongside the entire history surrounding the adoption of such a provision, is aptly referred to by Orysia Demska as the “Drama under the Dome” (Demska 2024: 259–273).

And what did ordinary people do who had formerly lived in a state where Russian was referred to by the epithet “great, grand”, while Ukrainian was considered the “lesser sister” (Masenko 2017: 193)? Ukrainians communicated as best they could, or as their language proficiency allowed them.

The mixed Ukrainian-Russian speech is referred to as Surzhyk. Some individuals broaden this term to encompass any Ukrainian-foreign mixed

code. However, in this study, the term *Surzhyk* specifically denotes the Ukrainian-Russian mixed code.

Attitudes towards *Surzhyk* in Ukrainian society have been changing somewhat recently. In previous studies, linguists had held an extremely negative attitude toward it (e.g. Masenko 2019), and Ukrainian elites also mostly held negative views (Stavytska 2014). Bilaniuk (2018) registers a shift in the perception of *Surzhyk* from the completely negative to the somewhat positive. The necessity of abandoning *Surzhyk* in favor of Ukrainian or Russian is reflected in respondents' narratives reported on by Krasowska (2020). In studies from central Ukraine, various positions can be observed, ranging from complete rejection of this code to fairly positive attitudes (e.g. Hentschel/Zeller 2016). A similar perception of the problem is shown by Reuther (2023). The Russian-Ukrainian war has prompted a reassessment of the language practices of Ukrainian citizens, as indicated by recent linguistic research (Yaremko/Levchuk 2023).

Research methodology

This study focuses exclusively on questions regarding emotional attitudes towards *Surzhyk*, not only among its users but also among the wider population of Ukraine.

Our research is based on a questionnaire developed by Władysław Miodunka for a study on emotional attitudes toward the Polish language among Brazilians of Polish origin (Miodunka 2003).

I have modified this questionnaire for the purposes of Slavic studies, specifically focusing on attitudes toward Polish and Ukrainian. In a previous study, I expanded the questionnaire to include Russian (Levchuk 2020). In 2022, I iteratively modified the questionnaire based on the respondent groups and shifts in the political landscape of Ukraine. Drawing on research by Hentschel and Palinska (Hentschel/Palinska 2022), a spectrum of statements for eliciting responses was developed, ranging from extremely negative to neutral to positive and aiming to capture the most authentic range of attitudes.

Own research

The survey was conducted in May–June 2023, using an electronic questionnaire that comprised over 30 questions. The questions pertained to the frequency of the respondents' use of the Ukrainian and Russian languages, the contexts in which they use these languages, their interlocutors, their emotional attitudes towards Ukrainian and Russian, and their views on the status of the Ukrainian, Polish, and Crimean Tatar languages in Ukraine.

In this article, we present the responses to a single question, the question pertaining to Surzhyk.

A total of 1298 respondents participated in the study, 81% of whom were women. Geographically, the highest number of respondents resided in the Chernihiv region (17.7%), followed by Kyiv (12.9%), the Lviv region (11.2%), and the Volyn region (10.9%). Residents of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and temporarily occupied territories were not included in the research.

94.2% of the respondents identified themselves as Ukrainian by nationality, while others identified themselves as having mixed nationality (Ukrainian and Russian, or Ukrainian and other nationalities). None of the respondents identified themselves solely as Russian.

62.2% of the respondents possess higher education qualifications: 11.2% hold doctoral or postdoctoral degrees, while the remaining individuals have completed primary or secondary education.

While this sample may not be fully representative, the participants' responses do provide insight into certain trends in attitudes, especially in the context of the full-scale Russian aggression.

The criterion employed for dividing the respondents into groups was their self-reported first language. Respondents could identify either Ukrainian as their first language (L1_UKR: 63.0% of respondents, or 818 individuals), or Russian (L1_RUS: 23.9% of respondents, or 310 individuals), or both Ukrainian and Russian as first languages (L1_UKR+RUS; 10.5%, or 136 individuals). A small group – 2.4% or 31 individuals – identified their first language differently; therefore, their responses will not be counted in the division into the above groups but will be included in the overall reporting on all respondents.

The important thing to note is that Surzhyk was not mentioned as a possible first language among the first-language options provided, as, according to the generally accepted typology of languages, it is not a separate language, but a fused lect.

The exact wording of the question under discussion was: “Which of the following statements best reflects your emotional attitude toward Surzhyk?” Respondents were permitted to agree with more than one predefined statement as well as to add an optional commentary to their response. In this publication, we include all comments that were submitted.

	All respondents n = 1298	L1_UKR n = 818	L1_RUS n = 310	L1_UKR+RUS n = 136
(1) This is the legacy of linguistic genocide of the Ukrainian language, which needs to be eradicated.	35.3 %	39.7 %	27.8 %	27.9 %
(2) Sometimes I speak Surzhyk in various situations.	27.3 %	27.3 %	27.5 %	28.7 %
(3) It is just a means of communication.	19.0 %	16.8 %	22.0 %	24.3 %
(4) I don't like it.	17.8 %	17.5 %	19.7 %	15.4 %
(5) It [Surzhyk] is my first language.	4.1 %	5.0 %	1.0 %	2.2 %
(6) I enjoy speaking Surzhyk.	4.2 %	3.1 %	5.8 %	8.1 %

Table 1: Emotional attitudes towards Surzhyk. Author's processing.

The most widely held view among respondents (except for the group speaking two first languages) is that Surzhyk is the legacy of the linguistic genocide of the Ukrainian language and that it needs to be eradicated (response 1). In the individual comments on this statement, respondents write the following:

- *Horror.... Chimeras in nature don't survive; I hope Surzhyk will also die out.* (L1_UKR)
- *It shouldn't exist; this abominable creature disfigures both languages.* (L1_RUS)

A closer look at the comments shows that people feel Surzhyk can be tolerated as a transitional code from Russian to Ukrainian, which is also confirmed by other comments:

- *Surzhyk is a terrible phenomenon, but it's still better than Russian. Of course, we should get rid of it, but it can be a first step for people transitioning from Russian to Ukrainian in everyday life, so this phenomenon deserves tolerance, at least for now.*(L1_UKR)
- *Worse than pure Russian, but it can be a transitional stage in mastering the Ukrainian language.* (L1_UKR+RUS)
- *I support and assist Russian-speaking Ukrainians who, when transitioning to the Ukrainian language, initially speak Surzhyk.* (L1_UKR)
- *I believe that there is nothing wrong with Surzhyk for those who are transitioning from Russian to Ukrainian or who live in regions where Surzhyk is spoken. Let people gradually transition to more "Ukrainian" Ukrainian :). But there's no need to shame them for Surzhyk – it will only lead to resistance against the Ukrainian language.* (L1_UKR)
- *As a transitional stage for those transitioning from Russian to Ukrainian, it may be a possible option, but temporary. As a permanent means of communication, it is a negative phenomenon.* (L1_UKR+RUS)
- *Better Surzhyk than Russian; over time, people will learn to master Ukrainian better.* (L1_UKR+RUS)
- *I have close ones who speak Surzhyk. I am indifferent to this. Better this way than in Russian. But it's still better in pure Ukrainian than in Surzhyk.* (L1_UKR+RUS)
- *It's better to speak Surzhyk than Russian.* (L1_RUS)
- *I believe that Surzhyk is no big deal. But we should try to eradicate it.* (L1_UKR+RUS)

We consider the predefined statements 2 (“Sometimes I speak Surzhyk in various situations.”) and 3 (“It’s just a means of communication.”) to be “neutral” or “not emotionally colored”.

On average, 27,3 % of all participants report that they sometimes use Surzhyk in various situations. In their individual comments, respondents explain this as follows:

- *I like using some fitting words to emphasize something, in both languages.* (L1_UKR)
- *I use it out of ignorance of literary language.* (L1_RUS)

- *Yes, indeed, Surzhyk is a negative phenomenon from a linguistic point of view, BUT Surzhyk is an endless source of humor; with Surzhyk, one can add a comedic touch to expressions, so it cannot be said that it should be completely eradicated. Perhaps it could be eradicated for official communication, but left for comedic expression :) (L1_UKR)*
- *I use it to have a laugh with my loved ones. (L1_UKR)*
- *I try to eradicate Surzhyk in myself, but I don't pay attention to others using it. Better to speak Surzhyk than Russian. (L1_UKR)*
- *For now, there's no other way. (L1_UKR)*
- *To emphasize the character's situation I'm describing. (L1_UKR)*
- *Sometimes I use it. (L1_UKR)*
- *I speak Surzhyk in everyday life and I don't believe it needs to be eradicated. But that doesn't mean I've stopped being Ukrainian because of my language, and it doesn't mean I've stopped communicating in Ukrainian either. (L1_UKR+RUS)*
- *I try to root out Surzhyk from my language, but I don't consider it terrible if older people use it. (L1_UKR+RUS)*
- *In my city, unfortunately, the majority of people communicate using Surzhyk :((L1_UKR)*
- *It so happens that my grandmother speaks Surzhyk, and generally many people use Surzhyk, so when I talk to them, I also use Surzhyk myself. (L1_UKR+RUS)*

Among all groups (excluding L1_UKR, where this view is only held by 16.8%), 19.0% to 24.3% consider Surzhyk to be a means of communication (predefined statement 3) and do not express any emotional attitude towards this code:

- *This is a result of parallel coexistence of languages, language interference, which also occurs with other languages I speak. (L1_UKR)*
- *I strive to speak pure Ukrainian. (L1_UKR)*
- *It's a legacy of linguicide, but I don't believe it should be eradicated. With time, everything will balance out. Language always changes, depending on the geographical neighbor. For example, in the western part of Ukraine, there are similarities with the Polish language – in terms of accent or certain words. Yes, that can also be considered as Surzhyk. Therefore, let Surzhyk exist! (L1_UKR)*

- *One cannot deny Surzhyk as a linguistic phenomenon; it exists in everyday life, and many people use it as a means of communication. (L1_UKR)*
- *It is what makes language alive. I don't use Surzhyk or dialects, but I'm against eradicating them. (L1_RUS)*
- *Not everyone can speak without Surzhyk, I understand that. But it's somewhat irritating. (L1_UKR+RUS)*
- *It can't be eradicated :) Sometimes it's wonderful! :) (L1_UKR)*

A fourth option (predefined statement 4: "I don't like it.") was chosen by 17.8 % of all respondents. Regarding this option, respondents provided the following comments:

- *More like a comedic tool – to laugh at. Overall, communication should take place in pure language. (L1_UKR)*
- *I don't speak Surzhyk, I rather don't like it much. But it existed and will continue to exist, especially in rural areas. I don't see how that could change. I want to believe that all citizens in our country understand Ukrainian and can communicate in it officially. Currently, the goal, as I understand it, is to popularize the Ukrainian language in everyday life. Everyday life is not subject to coercion or language regulation; here, only soft promotion can be discussed. The main places where children can communicate in Russian are within the family and with peers (including at school, not during classes, but in informal communication). It is unlikely that there is a way to influence parents (because for this, they need to start speaking Ukrainian at home themselves, which is a serious psychological step that not everyone is capable of, especially those who have been accustomed to speaking Russian at home all their lives). However, at school, you can try to blur the line between lessons and informal communication by making changes to the way Ukrainian language is taught. (L1_UKR)*

Only a small proportion, 8.3 % of all respondents, exhibited an explicitly and openly positive attitude towards Surzhyk (predefined statements 5 and 6), with the highest percentage (10.3 %), among those who have two first languages (L1_UKR+RUS). Additionally, 4.1 % identified Surzhyk as their first language, while 4.2 % expressed enjoyment in speaking it. Only one respondent with a positive attitude provided an expanded commentary:

I adore Surzhyk – it represents the uniqueness of the people, their linguistic creativity and colorful expression shine brightly. I enjoy watching videos where Surzhyk is used to create atmosphere and convey local color. Such works should be considered part of cultural heritage, as they capture certain linguistic processes and conditions. I consider it expedient to increase funding and strengthen the study of language mixtures in Ukraine, to document linguistic diversity and richness, to study language mixture as a positive and necessary phenomenon in language development, to introduce young people to the observed processes, to combat elitist attitudes and prejudice towards languages of different social strata of the population, to acquaint the population with the Language Charter, and to orient language policy towards European approaches to preserving linguistic diversity in Europe. I like the example of Bavaria, which struggled with the Bavarian dialect for a long time but then recognized its value and introduced mandatory study of the regional dialect in educational institutions, as dialects are threatened with extinction and require enhanced institutional support. Ukraine should adopt the European experience in preserving linguistic diversity. (L1_UKR)

While there were no explicit associations made between Surzhyk and dialects in the wording of the question or predefined statement response options, a certain portion of respondents demonstrated an understanding of this term as a dialect of the Ukrainian language rather than a fused lect:

- *What is Surzhyk? Which Surzhyk do you mean: English-Ukrainian or Polish-Ukrainian? I don't like that Polish-Ukrainian and Hungarian-Ukrainian Surzhyk are being presented as Ukrainian, while the Chernihiv or Zhytomyr dialect is seen as linguisticicide of the Ukrainian language. The author's attitude in the survey is prejudiced, without acknowledging the right to choose the local dialect as a separate language culture of the region. (L1_UKR)*
- *Transcarpathian, Galician, Hutsul, Polissian, and Poltava Surzhyk are part of the cultural heritage that is characteristic of specific regions. Sometimes it sounds funny, but I'm okay with it. (L1_UKR)*
- *It's a beautiful and internally logical dialect of the Ukrainian language. It's the language of Skovoroda, which even preceded the language of Kotlyarevsky. It's very unfortunate that I can't express myself fluently in Surzhyk, and in conversation with speakers of Surzhyk, I revert to literary Ukrainian. (L1_UKR)*

- *In our region, Surzhyk is a mixture of Polish, Ukrainian, and Belarusian languages. Yes, it's the language of my childhood. (L1_UKR)*
- *This depends on whether it is Surzhyk or a dialect. Dialect is wonderful! Surzhyk – in my opinion, is not okay, but it has its place in certain regions. (L1_UKR)*
- *Eastern dialect is not Surzhyk. They don't communicate in literary Ukrainian even in the farthest western regions, it's not Ukrainian language. (L1_UKR)*
- *I think we need to distinguish between Surzhyk and dialect. Surzhyk is Ukrainian with Russian words. Dialects are more diverse, but they are not always part of the literary language. (L1_RUS)*
- *Dialect is often confused with Surzhyk. It's a pity that people don't understand how dialects form. (L1_UKR+RUS)*
- *It has become difficult in some places to distinguish Surzhyk from the local dialect. Especially in the northern regions. Surzhyk sounds more emotionally charged here, which people like. (L1_UKR)*
- *I speak the Chernihiv dialect and enjoy communicating in it within a certain circle of people who understand it. But that's not Surzhyk. Surzhyk needs to be eradicated. (L1_UKR+RUS)*
- *Unfortunately, Surzhyk has surpassed the usage and knowledge of Polish/Volhynian dialects and other dialects in various regions of Ukraine. (L1_UKR)*

Summary of findings from participant responses and comments

At this time of the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine, more than half of the respondents have a negative attitude towards Surzhyk, with 35.3 % of the total number of respondents considering it the legacy of linguicide of the Ukrainian language.¹ However, we can note the decline in the percentage of respondents holding strongly negative views in comparison with the research by Hentschel and Zeller (2016), where a similar predefined response statement (“The mixed language poses a threat to Ukrainian culture”) was chosen by 45.0 % of respondents.

¹ The characterization of Surzhyk as “linguicide” presumably led many respondents to adopt this view. However, the individual comments provided more differentiated perspectives.

In our study, 46.3% of respondents indicate that they have a neutral attitude towards Surzhyk, meaning they tolerate its presence, sometimes even speaking Surzhyk themselves or using it as a means of expressing humor.

Only 8.3% of all respondents and only 10.3% of those with two first languages (Ukrainian and Russian) have an explicitly positive attitude towards Surzhyk. Of those who view Surzhyk positively, some even consider it to be their first language.

The respondents' self-declared first language was not highly impactful in determining their attitudes to Surzhyk.

Many respondents view Surzhyk as a transitional code from Russian to Ukrainian, which, as such, can be tolerated. This contrasts with the previously widespread totally negative view of this phenomenon.

Another important observation is that a certain portion of respondents demonstrated a perception of Surzhyk as a dialect of the Ukrainian language rather than as a distinct linguistic code. In their comments, one can encounter these wordings as folk linguistic attempts to combine or separate mixed speech and dialects in the linguistic sense of these terms. Further investigation may be necessary to explore the reasons behind this perception and its implications for language policy and education.

Conclusions

Ukrainian linguistics has traditionally viewed Surzhyk negatively, which was reinforced by state education and puristic tendencies, and this position can be seen in the survey.

Approximately half of the respondents exhibit a neutral or positive attitude towards Surzhyk.

In the context of the full-scale Russian aggression that started in 2022, some see Surzhyk as a transitional language for those shifting from Russian to Ukrainian.

There is a difficulty among the population in distinguishing Surzhyk from dialects.

In the future, it will be worthwhile to investigate how attitudes towards Ukrainian, Russian, and Surzhyk will undergo changes. In this context, investigation through studies in the form of linguistic biographies over time might open new perspectives on this topic.

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