The Rusyn Language in Ukraine and Slovakia: Identity and Language Preservation

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1. Introduction

Joshua Fishman, in his article "What do you lose when you lose your language" (1996), says that the ties between a language and the culture of a community go both ways. On the one hand, a language both expresses and symbolizes its community's culture. On the other hand, "positive ethnolinguistic consciousness," an attitude towards language in a community's culture that includes a sense of kin/community, holiness, and responsibility towards one's language, is necessary if one wants to stabilize a language which is in danger. Fishman also argues that "creating community is the hardest part of stabilizing a language" (1996: 80), but it is necessary because only such a community can sustain intergenerational language transmission, which is the main prerequisite for language preservation. The general consensus is that if a language is not transmitted to children, it is well down the road to extinction (see, e.g., the scale in Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 20: *Safe – At Risk – Disappearing – Moribund* [not transmitted to children] – *Nearly extinct – Extinct*).[1] What Fishman effectively says is that language preservation

1 That is a widely accepted point of view; see also Krauss (1992: 4), though there are also other views: see a slightly different understanding of "moribund" in Wurm (1998: 192). See an overview in Crystal (2000: 26 ff).

can be carried out only by a community of people who care enough to undertake sustained efforts to preserve or rescue their language because good feelings about, and commitment towards their language are part of their culture. If culture is needed to sustain the language associated with it, it also might mean that the damage done to the culture might result in damage to its language.

In this paper, I discuss the mechanism and implications of such damage through the example of the deliberate ruining of Carpatho-Rusyn culture in the post-World War II period. The damage to the Carpatho-Rusyn culture at that time was an important factor leading to serious changes in the status of the Rusyn language in Ukraine and its endangerment in Slovakia.

2. Geographical Scope; Materials

The people who are the subject of this article live in the Carpathian Mountains of Eastern Europe. Their language, Rusyn, belongs to the East Slavic group; it is the westernmost language in the group. Their homeland is a compact territory within the borders of several contemporary states: Ukraine, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Hungary; there are also small enclaves in Serbia (the province of Vojvodina) and Croatia. The name of the people can vary: the population have called themselves Rusyns or Rusnaks; historically the ethnonym Rusyn also denotes other groups of people (namely, the East Slavic population of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth).[2] The ethnonym accepted

2 "... at least until the 1920s, the Ukrainians of Galicia and Bukovina also called themselves Rusyns. Consequently, Ukrainian authors considered the ethnonym Rusyn to be an older name for Ukrainian, while Russian authors considered it to be a regional name for Russian." Magocsi (1998: 39). The ethnonym Boiko or Lemko is not used by the people themselves: "... none of the so-called Lemkos and very few of the so-called Boikos living on the southern slopes of the Carpathians have ever called themselves Lemkos or Boikos, but instead use the terms Rusyn or Rusnak to describe themselves." Magocsi (1998: 311). In the Hungarian census of 1910, the respondents were asked to state their native language; if there were a question about nationality, it would probably reflect citizenship rather than language (ibid., 318).

in contemporary scholarship is Carpatho-Rusyn,[3] but I will use the term Rusyn when speaking of the language. In this article, I will talk mostly about the Carpatho-Rusyns of Ukraine and will briefly reference those in Slovakia. My own research is based on interviews with Carpatho-Rusyns in Ukraine and Slovakia conducted in 1987–1992 and in 2009–2016.

3. Historical Situation and Demographics of Rusyn Speakers

The number of Rusyn speakers in Slovakia was slightly more than 30,000 in 2014.[4] In Ukraine, according to the 2001 census, Rusyn speakers live mostly in the Transcarpathian region, where their numbers are not high: in the census of 2001, fewer than 7000 people stated their native language was Rusyn and about 11 thousand people stated their nationality was Rusyn (that is about 0.5% and 0.8% of the population of the region, while Ukrainians have constituted more than 80%, or about one million). In the interwar period, 1919–1939, when these territories belonged to Czechoslovakia, the number of Rusyns was 372,500 in Subcarpathian Rus' (the contemporary Transcarpathian Region of Ukraine) and 85,600 in the Prešov Region (of contemporary Slovakia).[5]

Official data suggest that the number of Rusyn speakers in Transcarpathia alone dropped 53 times since the interwar period. However, the actual numbers of Rusyn speakers, at least in Transcarpathia, may be much larger. In Transcarpathia, out of about one million people who stated their native language was Ukrainian, the majority were born in the region. In everyday life they use the same dialects as the people who state that their native language is Rusyn. Ukrainians from eastern regions of the country have a very hard time understanding the natives of Transcarpathia. Transcarpathians understand literary Ukrainian because of school instruction and mass media, which are exclusively in Ukrainian.

3 Magocsi (2015: 578–589), see also Figure 1 ibid., showing the compact territory populated by Rusyns according to the Austro-Hungarian census. For more detail, see Magocsi (1998; 2011).

4 According to the data in the Statistical Yearbook of the Slovak Republic 2015.

5 Magocsi (2015: 582).

4. The Rusyn Language between the Wars

In both territories, historic Subcarpathian Rus' and the Prešov Region, Rusyn dialects were the main means of communication in the rural area.[6] In interwar Subcarpathian Rus', then a distinct province of Czechoslovakia with nominal autonomy and its own governor, the Rusyn language was made official alongside Czech (Magocsi 2015: 582). That helped the language to be used in a number of contexts beyond everyday communication (periodicals, courts, primary education, etc.) The language was not yet officially codified, or made uniform; rather, it existed as a number of varieties, ranging from a version of written Russian with very few local elements (this variety remained as the language of the Rusyn emigré press in America until it died out in the 1960s, see Bidwell 1971) to local dialects.

The language used in literature and periodicals by writers and newspaper journalists was most often based on another language (Russian or Ukrainian), with only a couple of writers (Hodynka, Stryps'kŷj) using the forms closer to local dialects. In education, a more Russified/Church Slavonicized version was used. In a sense, there was an understanding (that continued in Rusyn American schools of the twentieth century) that Rusyns spoke one language, but wrote in a different one, and that the written language of Rusyns was closer to Russian, or effectively was Russian.[7] The language of the local government was closer to spoken varieties, but it was not uniform. In the end, the official communications were

6 More so in the Subcarpathian Rus', except for several districts in the south-west with a purely Hungarian village population; less so in the Prešov region where villages speaking Rusyn and East Slovak dialects were often next to one another.

7 The vestiges of such views can be seen among some Rusyn language activists till now. When I was working with a teacher of Rusyn in Sunday schools on a translation from English into Rusyn, when the prewar Rusyn language did not have a word for a contemporary item, the teacher would pick a word that would be closer to Russian than to Ukrainian. On the one hand, this may be the wish to distance from Ukrainian, the dominant language; on the other hand, her understanding was that Rusyn literary vocabulary for some reason was closer to Russian.

issued in a Russified version of the spoken language. Official paperwork for local needs was more often based on consistent dialect forms. The local elements became very prominent in the language of official communication during the Hungarian period in Subcarpathian Rus', 1939–1944, when generally the Rusynophile orientation was promoted (see Magocsi 2015a: 287 ff., and the texts in Kapral' 2010, Kapral' 2011). At that time, Rusyn started on the way to becoming a language – from the vernacular to a standard, developed, elaborated language. Although initially it bore the strong imprint of another language that was considered preferable for writing, with time it developed more usages for its own elements in certain spheres. It was acquiring elaboration (in the terms of Haugen 1966: 505), which is maximal variation in function, if not yet standardization, which is minimal variation in form.

5. The So-called 'Re-unification' with the Soviet Union

After the Soviet Army came to the territory of Subcarpathian Rus' in September–October 1944, it soon transpired that Stalin had decided not to return this territory to Czechoslovakia. Instead, "security officers in the Soviet Army together with local Subcarpathian Communist activists organized in Mukachevo on 26 November 1944 the first Congress of People's Committees, which called for the 're-unification' of what was now called Transcarpathian Ukraine ... with its 'Soviet Ukrainian motherland,' hence, with the Soviet Union."[8] The "re-unification" formally took place in June 1945, when Czechoslovakia formally ceded Transcarpathian Ukraine to the USSR.[9]

6. In the Soviet Ukraine after the war

After the territory of Subcarpathian Rus' became part of the Soviet Union, the Soviet government in Ukraine started to eradicate the various components of Rusyn national identity. Similar processes were soon carried out in Slovakia. The Soviet authorities had vast experience

8 Magocsi (2015: 584).
9 Magocsi (2015: 585).

stamping out national and cultural identities with the goal of creating "the new historical community of people – the Soviet people," i.e., imposing on people the new Soviet identity and effectively ridding them of their old loyalties.

The Soviet experience included the collectivization of the 1930s which, besides causing massive loss of life, broke the intergenerational transmission of culture in the Russian village (see Olson and Adonyeva 2013), as well as in the Ukrainian village. Another Soviet practice was the mass deportation of nationalities. This deprived minorities of their native land that had played a key role in their identity, damaged intergenerational ties, and pushed minorities to cultural assimilation. The experience of mass deportations in the Soviet Union before, during, and after WWII was also adapted to the new countries of the Soviet bloc (Poland, Czechoslovakia, etc.), together with other practices that destroyed minority identities.

In the case of Transcarpathian Rusyns, unlike the Lemko Rusyns in Poland, there were no mass deportations, but a different strategy was adopted in order to dilute the Rusyn population by bearers of the Soviet mentality. After 1945 a massive influx of new settlers, Russians and Ukrainians, was organized, so that by 1989, there were about 170,000 Ukrainians and 49,000 Russians who arrived from other parts of the Soviet Union.[10] Also, several other aspects of the Carpatho-Rusyns' national identity were attacked at the same time: the group's name, Rusyn or Rusnak, was banned and replaced by the name Ukrainian; the Greek Catholic church was eradicated and replaced by the Orthodox church;[11] and the Rusyn language was banished from all public spheres –

10 See Magocsi (2015a: 309).

11 In Transcarpathia, by the time of the arrival of the Red Army, the Orthodox church held one-fifth of all parishes. After that, Orthodox agitators helped by the Red Army converted 60 more parishes to Orthodoxy. Then, in 1947, the Greek Catholic bishop Theodor Romzha, who refused to break with Rome, was subjected to an arranged traffic accident and was then poisoned in the hospital; the pressure on the remaining Greek Catholic priests to convert to Orthodoxy continued; and in 1949, the Greek Catholic church was declared illegal; the remaining priests, monks and nuns were arrested, and the property was confiscated, often to be «loaned» to the Orthodox church. See Magocsi (2015a: 314 f).

government, media, education, etc. – and demoted to the status of dialect, that is, an idiom "excluded from polite society" (Haugen 1966: 499).

7. "Rusyn is not a Language"

The official policy of Ukrainian authorities towards the Rusyn language has been a strict and angry rejection of its status and its classification as a dialect of Ukrainian. This policy started with the arrival of the Soviets, and continues throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet periods down to today. At present, Ukraine's position is understandable, because the claim for a distinct language could be understood as a claim for territorial separatism, something especially suspect, taking into account the so-called "Russian speakers' support" by Putin in the East of Ukraine.

However, such an attitude towards the Rusyn language was in place long before Putin's territorial claims. I will give just one example from 2011, chosen because it demonstrates both the official Ukrainian position towards the Rusyn language and the grassroots response from Carpatho-Rusyns (thanks to the Internet and the option for readers to leave comments!). An article by Anna Tarkanij (UA-Reporter.com) titled "Transcarpathian Babylon, or There is no common language for all"[12] supports the official point of view that the Rusyn language does not exist, and quotes several people in favor of this view, such as the Dean of the Department of Philology in the Užhorod University, etc. Among the interviewees is Pavlo Čučka Jr., an Užhorod-based poet who writes popular humoristic poetry in Rusyn but in Ukrainian script. His position is the following: "We have [=these, i.e. who argue for the Rusyn language, are] sordid, corrupted, primitive people. [Truck] drivers start to argue with professors to claim the existence of some language of their own."[13]

This "how-dare-they" colonial attitude gives power to experts and authorities, and in a rude, insulting way denies people any say in

12 Tarkanij (2011).

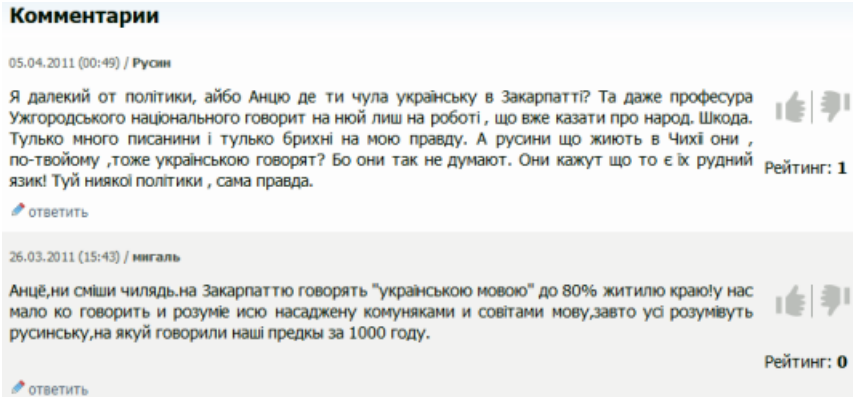
13 «Маємо нечистоплотних, корисливих і примітивних. Шофери починають сперечатися з професорами і доводити існування якоїсь їхньої мови.» ibid.

the question of their own language. The person who wrote this article propagating the official position, however, has a local, Rusyn last name.[14]

That is probably the reason why her article is followed by two comments addressed to her[15] that are in Rusyn, written apparently by two different people since they use slightly different orthography (the first one does not use *ŷ*, the second one does). Unlike Čučka, both commentators are calm in tone (which is rare for post-Soviet Internet discussions) and contain reasoning with the author but no personal

14 The name Tarkanij is listed and etymologized (from Hungarian) in the dictionary of Transcarpathian last names (Čučka 2005: 545). Another possibility is that the author, and her being Rusyn, is known in the community.

15 Here are the texts and translation of the two comments:



Комментарии

05.04.2011 (00:49) / **Русин**

Я далекий от політики, айбо Анцю де ти чула українську в Закарпатті? Та даже професура Ужгородського національного говорит на ній лиш на роботі , що вже казати про народ. Шкода. Тулько много писанини і тулько брихні на мою правду. А русини що жиють в Чихії они , по-твойому ,тоже українською говорят? Бо они так не думают. Они кажут що то є їх рудний язик! Туй ниякої політики , сама правда.

Рейтинг: **1**

ответить

26.03.2011 (15:43) / **мигаль**

Анцё,ни сміши чилядь.на Закарпаттю говорять "українською мовою" до 80% житилю краю!у нас мало ко говорить и розуміе ісю насаджену комуняками и совітами мову,завто усі розумівуть русинську,на якуй говорили наші предкы за 1000 году.

Рейтинг: **0**

ответить

Translation:

1 (Rusyn): I am far from politics, but Ancjo, where did you hear Ukrainian in Transcarpathia? Even the professors of the Užhorod Nat'l University speak it only at work, and simple people don't do even that. So much writing, and so many lies against my truth. And the Rusyns who live in the Czech Republic, do they also speak Ukrainian? They don't think so. They say it is their native language. It is not politics, just the truth.

2 (Myhal' [Michael, a common name]): Ancjo, don't be ridiculous, what do you mean – "up to 80% of the population in Transcarpathia speak Ukrainian?" Very few people speak or understand this language pressed on us by Communists and Soviets, but all understand Rusyn, which our ancestors have been speaking for 1000 years.

insults. Both commentators address the author by the diminutive, endearing Rusyn form of her first name and by the familiar, informal 2nd person pronoun, which creates a family atmosphere. Both commentators treat the author as a community member and remind her of things she, an insider, should be well familiar with. The first comment says that even university professors in Transcarpathia speak Rusyn outside of work; the second one says that very few really speak the literary Ukrainian language introduced and enforced by the Soviets. The authors of these comments do not blame or shame the author of the article for supporting the official point of view. They rather remind her that this point of view may be convincing for outsiders, but insiders see right through it. For them, it is a ridiculous piece of propaganda intended to do more symbolic violence to insiders' valuable language. In short, she, an insider, should have known better.

8. *"Our Speech is Trashed up"* Master Narrative

However, the attitudes towards the Rusyn language among its speakers are not always so beneficial. After 1945, literary Rusyn was effectively banished from public usage and therefore, practically eradicated. Nevertheless, the Soviet administration had no means to forbid half a million people to speak Rusyn in everyday life. It could, however, do symbolic violence against the spoken language, in order to demote its status and to make speakers ashamed of it. One very effective tool for such symbolic violence was the new master narrative[16] of "trashed up speech." While collecting local dialects in Transcarpathia, since the 1980s, I discovered that almost every encounter with a native speaker started with an explanation that seemed to be repeated almost verbatim from person to person: "Our way of speaking is a very badly twisted Ukrainian, we have so many Hungarian, Polish, German, Romanian words, our idiom is so trashed up" (*наша мова засмічена*). Recently, I was surprised to find this master narrative applied by Rusyns to their language also on the Slovak side of the border. It seems to be a post-war, Soviet invention, not

16 In the sense of Clifton and Van De Mieroop (2016).

found in the Rusyn interwar literature or journalism.[17]

The assumption that vocabulary is the main element of a language, and that a language whose vocabulary has multiple loanwords is not a proper language, is present also in many contemporary Internet holy wars on the topic of language in Ukraine.[18] It is possible that this master narrative originated in the Ukraine's school system and was designed to humiliate dialect speakers. After 1945, both in Transcarpathia and Slovakia, the new Soviet school system organized for Rusyns with Ukrainian as the language of instruction (see below) was given the task of demoting and ridiculing the Rusyn language, and it did so by employing the «our speech is trashed up» master narrative. Rusyn speakers might have adopted this master narrative as a way of showing strangers that they are not only aware of the differences between their idiom and the standard one, but that they also have an explanation for it. However, since pride in all things Rusyn is nowadays low or non-existent, they may not realize that in using this dominant master narrative, they also adopt the dominant negative attitudes towards themselves and their language.

9. Factors Counterbalancing Negative Attitudes to Rusyn in Transcarpathia

Such negative language attitudes make Rusyn speakers ashamed of using their language in front of strangers. However, this does not prevent them from using Rusyn among themselves in everyday communication, whether in villages or towns. Furthermore, Transcarpathia is one of the few regions of Ukraine where, according to the census of 2001, rural areas experience natural increase of population. Children born in villages learn Rusyn as their first language, with the result that intergenerational

17 Interestingly, I have not seen this attitude among the Rusyns in America whose ancestors emigrated before 1945. Such Rusyns often explain to an interested stranger that their language contains a lot of words from other languages, but in their eyes, that does not carry any negative connotations. It is another proof that this attitude appeared among Rusyns in the Soviet period.

18 http://fakeoff.org/culture/russkiy-dialekt-ukrainskogo#.V_qFunfwjXs.twitter

transmission of the language continues. Moreover, the way of living in Transcarpathia may contribute to the Rusyn language preservation. As my interviews with Rusyns reveal,[19] their ancestors used to go abroad, either for seasonal work, such as harvesting grain in Hungary, or to coal mines in America and Belgium, in order to earn money and bring or send it home since the nineteenth century. Even in Soviet times, when most people in Transcarpathia could find work close to home, many formed temporary brigades and went to Russia and eastern Ukraine to earn grain and money as construction workers or harvesters. After the fall of the Soviet Union, most factories in Transcarpathia were closed; overpopulation made men go as construction workers to the Czech Republic, and women, as caregivers to Spain and Italy or as seasonal agricultural workers to Austria and Poland. The majority of workers do not consider permanent emigration as an option.[20]

This lifestyle – earning money abroad, bringing it home, building a house bigger and better than one's neighbor – allows people a considerable degree of freedom from the post-Soviet administration, and also lets them evade the stigma of speaking the wrong language and the pressure to shift to the prestigious one. In one's own village, a Rusyn speaks one's native language; at a building site in the Czech Republic, one also speaks one's native language to his fellow villagers in the brigade; one probably knows enough Czech to get along, but it is a foreign language that does not encroach on one's Rusyn. Also, since the foreign worker earns considerable amounts of money and brings it home, s/he becomes a respected person both in the village and in one's own eyes, and does not need to feel inferior because of one's speech.

In official and academic Ukraine, Rusyn is a dialect (idiom) of economic disadvantage, but abroad as well as in Rusyn villages it is not.

19 See also Magocsi (2015a: 145 ff).

20 That also was the case historically: out of Rusyns who went to America before WWII, an unusually high proportion, about 30%, returned home: see Magocsi (2015a: 145). According to my interviews, the people who returned (the interviewee's grand- and great-grandparents) usually brought home money, bought land, gave their children educations, and became respected people in their villages.

10. The Situation in Slovakia

In Slovakia, the attitude of the Communist government towards Carpatho-Rusyns was similar. After 1952, the Rusyns of Slovakia were forbidden to use their historic ethnonym; they were declared Ukrainians, and Ukrainian became their language in the public sphere, including school education.[21] Subsequently, Slovakia's Rusyns would choose more often to identify themselves as Slovaks, so that they would not have to identify themselves as Ukrainians.[22]

There were also at least two events of relocation that affected the Rusyns of Slovakia, though not on a large scale. In 1947, Rusyns were encouraged to move to Ukraine by the promise of land, and just over eight thousand did so.[23] Later, during the building of the Starina water reservoir in the 1970s, around three thousand were resettled to nearby towns (especially Snina).

Nowadays, there are more possibilities for Carpatho-Rusyns to earn money, but not in their native villages. Consequently, many people – especially young people – move to large cities which are outside the Rusyn ethnolinguistic area. There they shift to Slovak.

In the post-Communist era, Rusyns are officially recognized in Slovakia as a distinct national minority. Their language is acknowledged as a minority language; there are magazines and books published in Rusyn; there is a professional Rusyn-language theatre; there are TV and radio programs, and two elementary schools where Rusyn is the language of instruction. The Institute for Rusyn Language and Culture at Prešov University[24] publishes Rusyn textbooks and trains teachers. Despite all this, parents seem to prefer educating their children in Slovak. According to many Rusyns in Slovakia I interviewed, the Rusyn language is used less and less consistently in favor of Slovak, especially by the younger generation.[25] The damage to the Rusyn community and

21 Plishkova (2009: 70 ff).
22 See also Plishkova (2009: 71).
23 Magocsi (2015: 324).
24 Organized in 1993 and then renewed in 1999; see Plishkova (2009: 85, 137).
25 See also Plishkova (2009: 92).

positive consciousness, together with the economic pressure, seems to have led to the gradual decline of the language.[26]

11. Conclusions

There are two main aspects in the recent evolution of the Rusyn language: its use as a literary and official language, and its oral transmission between generations. While Soviet policy, which eliminated the Rusyn language from the public sphere, ruined the beginnings of the standard Rusyn language both in Ukraine and Slovakia, policies in post-Communist Slovakia have helped standardize the language. However, the Soviet/Communist policies damaging Rusyn national identity and positive ethnolinguistic consciousness contributed strongly to the Rusyn language decline in Slovakia, another factor being the economic pressure from the dominant Slovak language and culture.

In Ukraine, Soviet policies had also caused damage to the ethnic identity of Rusyns; however, the decline of the spoken Rusyn language seems to have happened there to a lesser degree, since the intergenerational transmission of language is still in place in villages. The cause for that might be both the larger numbers of Rusyn inhabitants in the Transcarpathian Region and the larger degree of their economic independence from the job market in Ukraine, specifically the Transcarpathian tradition of earning money abroad and sending it back home.

The future destiny of the Rusyn language in Ukraine and Slovakia, including its survival or decline, is likely to depend not as much on its codification as on the presence of a positive ethnolinguistic consciousness in the communities, that is, on the ability of individuals to ignore the pressure of the state ideology and instead, to pass on to their children a sense of pride that their Rusyn language is an important part of who they are.

26 Another factor contributing to the rapid decline of the Rusyn language in Slovakia could, of course, be the smaller size of the Rusyn population, which in the Prešov region was initially five times less than in Subcarpathian Rus'.

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