



**RECENT TRENDS IN THE  
UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE  
SITUATION  
(2020-2024)**

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# Background Information

Ukraine is / (has been) usually divided along a west-east and a north-south axis according to the prevalence assigned either to Ukrainian or Russian. The latter has functioned, at least until the full-scale Russian invasion (24<sup>th</sup> February 2022), as one of the main vehicular languages of the Country for most, if not all, its ethnic groups.

This is obviously an oversimplification of the real language situation (practice and distribution).

Besides Ukrainian (state language since 1989) and Russian (the second largest ethnic language), there exists a number of minority / regional languages; territorial/rural dialects and mixed varieties. For an overview, see: maps.

## **METHODOLOGY AND DATA**

In the following slides, we can only point out at generalized tendencies characterizing the current language situation in Ukraine (2022-2024) since we did not carry out a (large-scale) survey + statistical data.

### **DATA**

#### **are derived from**

- Personal (participant) observation (a few stays, mostly in the L'viv, Kyjiv and Transcarpathian areas, over the last two-year period);
- Individual Surveys in the Ukrainian-Belarusian border area (2016-2018);
- Related Studies and Reports on this topic.

## NATIONAL CENSUS 2001

The only national census after the Independence from the former Soviet Union (1991).

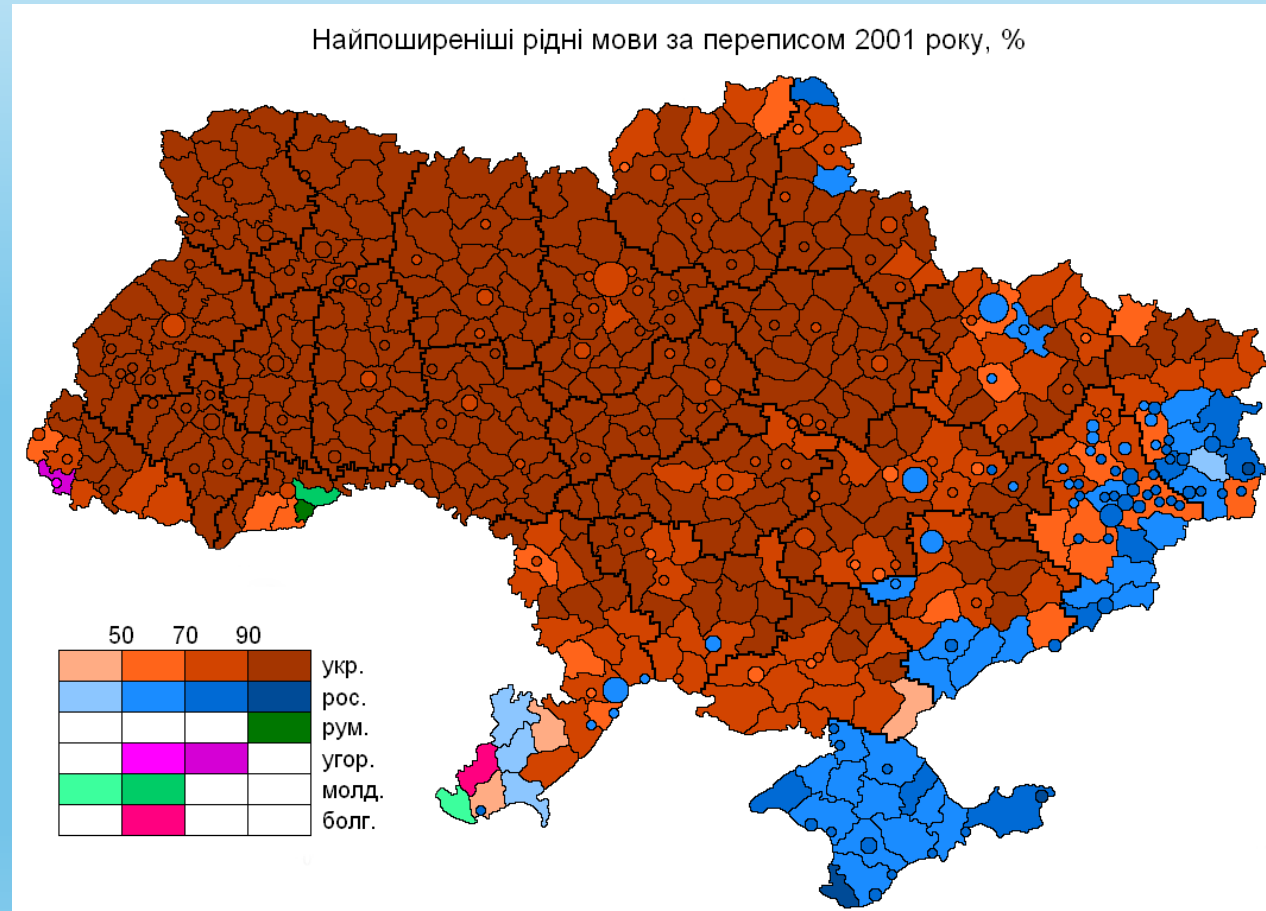
- ❑ Ethnic Ukrainians: 77.8% of the population.
- ❑ Other larger ethnic groups are Russians (17.3%), Belarusians (0.6%), Moldovans (0.5%), Crimean Tatars (0.5%), Bulgarians (0.4%), Hungarians (0.3%), Romanians (0.3%), Poles (0.3%), Jews (0.2%), Armenians (0.2%), and Greeks (0.2%).
- ❑ Ukraine also has smaller populations of Karaites (>0.1%), Krymchaks (>0.1%) and Gagauzes (0.1%).

[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2019\)032-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2019)032-e)



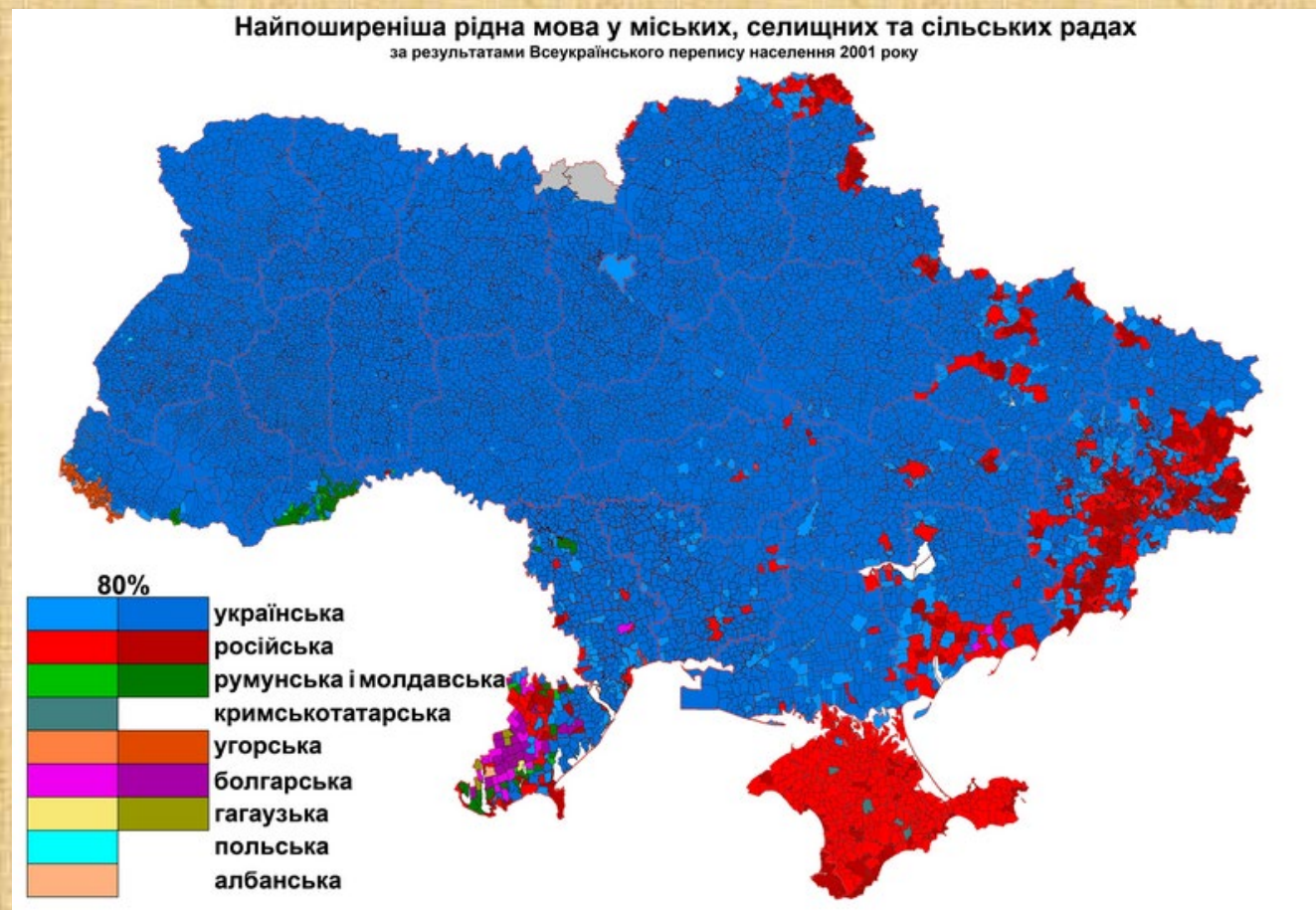
## Most diffused native languages (2001 census)

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/ba/Nativelanguage2001ua.PNG>



# Language distribution in urban and rural settings

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:UkraineNativeLanguagesCensus2001detailed.PNG>



## THE ROLE OF DIALECTS

For the sake of completeness, one should also mention the existence of diatopic (dialectal) variation.

The Ukrainian ethno-dialect territory and the Ukrainian-Russian and Ukrainian-Belarusian-based dialect continua extend far beyond the state border (Bevzenko, 1980: 240-242), not only in the direction of Belarusian Polessia/Polissia to the south of Brėst and Pinsk (Klimčuk, 1983: 7-13; Del Gaudio, 2014b: 276-277) but also towards the Russian territory: Starodub (Eastern Polessia), Kursk, Voronež, Kuban, etc. (Bevzenko, 1980: 7-13).

Dialects tend to converge – with the constant influence of standardization processes and other variables – towards regional forms and mixed varieties → Ukrainian Russian Mixed Speech (=URMS), commonly known as “Suržyk” (Cf. Del Gaudio 2010 and earlier contributions).





## **BILINGUALISM WITH DIGLOSSIA OR TRIGLOSSIC TRAITS?**

There is a traditional scholarly agreement that the country is characterized by various forms of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism with diglossia (Besters-Dilger 2009).

As said on a few occasions, this model required revision since the Ukrainian society was prevalently but not exclusively marked by semi-official bilingualism with triglossic traits. The triglossic model, with some theoretical modifications, was re-confirmed by Hentschel and Taranenko (2015: 248).

URMS, frequently indicated as the third code of Ukraine (Hentschel & Zeller 2017: 37) → **“Tricodality”**.



## A Contemporary Distribution of URMS «Suržyk»



Map: The strength of the three codes in the oblasts – clusters indicated by Roman numerals.

Source: reproduced from Hentschel & Taranenko (2021).

A colouring towards blue indicates the strength of Ukrainian, towards red the strength of Russian, and towards yellow of Suržyk.

## THE THREE MAIN CODES OF LARGE PARTS OF UKRAINE

In the decades preceding the full-scale invasion this tricodal situation could have been roughly subdivided in this way:

- ❑ Ukrainian = + H-variety;
- ❑ Russian = H-variety;
- ❑ The mixed speech “Suržyk”, generally on a Ukrainian base (i.e., Ukrainian-Russian Mixed Speech = URMS) = Low variety.

Cf. Del Gaudio (2010a: 258-261); Hentschel and Taranenko (2015: 248); Hentschel & Zeller (2017: 37) etc.

## **DYNAMIC OF LANGUAGE DIFFUSION (2012-2022)**

Ukrainian has been traditionally more rooted in the western regions (93%), while at the opposite end of the scale one could find the south of the country (48%).

In the central (including northern) regions, Ukrainian is known by most speakers (84%), and in the east by slightly more than half of the population (57%) (Šul'ha 2008: 51).

The period between 2012 and 2022 has undoubtedly been characterized by an intricate series of sociopolitical events and sudden, often radical, changes in language policy. These vicissitudes have likewise been somehow reflected in language choice and language attitudes.

The language situation, at least for some regions, has not drastically changed in the decade immediately preceding the current war.

## LAWS ON LANGUAGE

- The LAW ON LANGUAGE (2012), officially known as “On the Principles of the State Language Policy” (*Pro zasady deržavnoji movnoji polityky*). This law was severely criticized in 2014, with attempts to suspend it, especially following the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent outbreak of the conflict in the Donbas. After a few efforts at repealing the law, the Ukrainian Constitutional Court eventually declared it unconstitutional in February 2018.
- The law of April 25, 2019 on language policy, the object of controversial debates, tried to compensate for the problematic issues expressed above. It aimed at consolidating the status of Ukrainian as the sole state language. A visible shift towards Ukrainian could be perceived after the passing of the bill of 2019 (**LAW ON LANGUAGE USE**). On this point, also see: Paraševin 2019; Taranenko 2024 etc. + personal observation.

The text of the law No 5670-d can be consulted under: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2704-19> (07.06.2019). Also, see: [European Chart, Venice Commission](#).



## LANGUAGE ATTITUDES: UNDERWAY CHANGES BEFORE FEBRUARY 2022

Newer data compared with those of 2000s confirm the positive attitude towards the state language in most Ukrainian regions.

Many sociolinguistic and social surveys conducted between 2006 and 2016, registered a constant increase in the use of Ukrainian in most central-northern regions.

**Exceptions:** some traditional Russian-speaking enclaves of Kharkiv, Odesa and some other southeastern areas → , pro-Russian language firmness / resistance (Cf. Ukrainian concept: *movna stijkist*'), at least before the outbreak of the current war.

## Razumkov Centre Surveys: years immediately preceding the full-scale invasion

The **Ukrainian Center for Economic and Political Studies** (Razumkov Centre), in a series of studies on different aspects of ethnic identity, including language, reported the following results for the year 2016:

- circa **60%** of the population acknowledged **Ukrainian as their mother tongue** with a peak of 92.6% in the west and 78.2% in the center.
- The languages spoken **at home** gave the following picture: **Ukrainian 44%** of respondents (of these 5% mainly Ukrainian); **13% Russian** (of these 11% mostly Russian); **25% sometimes Ukrainian, sometimes Russian**; 1,4% other languages.

It should be pointed out that this research did not include the occupied territories of the Donbas area and Crimea.

*Identyčnist' hromadjan Ukrajiny v novyx umovax: stan, tendenciji, rehional'ni osoblyvosti* Razumkov Centre (2016: 8), cf.

<http://dontsov-nic.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Identi-2016.pdf> (11.06.2019).

## LANGUAGE PREFERENCES 2017-2021

Language preferences according to regional distribution confirmed an evident west vs south opposition. Ukrainian is spoken in the domestic setting by 91.3% of respondents in the west of the country, whereas it is spoken only by 26.4% in the south.

An intermediate position is occupied by the center (and northern regions) with 63.2% of respondents who consistently use Ukrainian at home. These figures show a clear preponderance of Ukrainian if compared with the data issued by various sources between the 1990s and early 2000s.

<https://dif.org.ua/article/the-ukrainian-language-experience-of-the-independent-ukraine> (28.06.2023).

## LANGUAGE PREFERENCES 2017-2021

Further data in the years immediately preceding the war, derived from a survey of the Il'ko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation together with the Razumkov Centre (August 2020), also showed a constant trend in favour of the Ukrainian language without evident discrimination in the use of Russian in the private sphere.

The question about which language the interviewees considered as native, gave these results: 73.4 % Ukrainian; 22% Russian and 1.7% other languages.

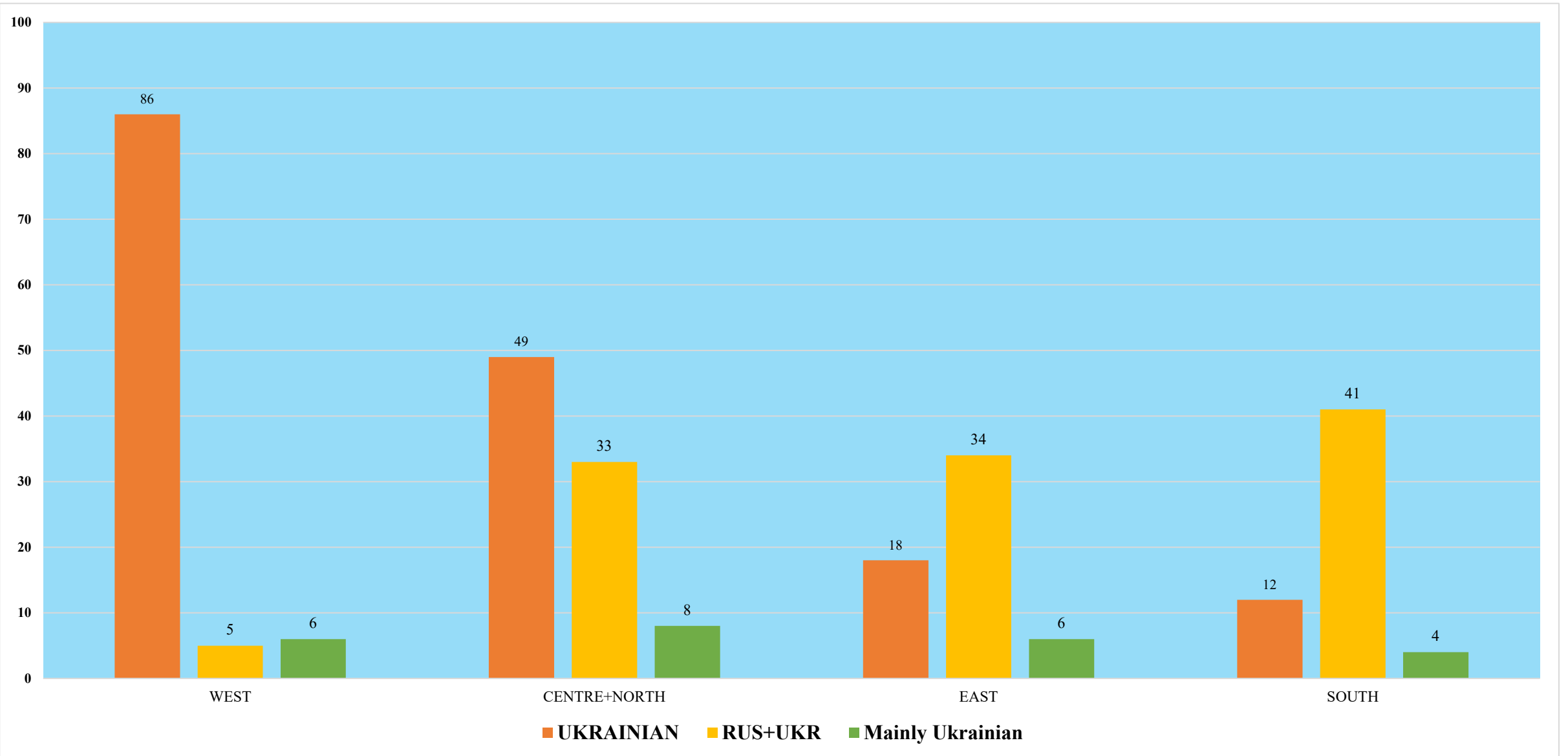
Cf. <https://dif.org.ua/article/the-ukrainian-language-experience-of-the-independent-ukraine> (07.12.2024)

**Also, see:** The sociological group “Rejtynh” states that **76%** of respondents out of 1,000 consider Ukrainian to be their native language compared to **57% in 2012**.

Cf. [https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/language\\_issue\\_in\\_ukraine\\_march\\_19th\\_2022.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/language_issue_in_ukraine_march_19th_2022.html) (28.06.2023).



# LANGUAGES SELECTION AT WORK (2016-17)



## LANGUAGE INTERACTION BEFORE FEBRUARY 2022

One could observe, before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a sort of a “balanced” coexistence, at least in most Ukrainian regions, of the two languages.

The relationship in the use and distribution of Ukrainian and Russian depended on a series of interrelated variables as, for example, the specific domains of usage (e.g. army, business, sport, private sphere, official communication and, of course, age, sex, education etc.), and the geographic provenance of the speakers.

**Cf.** Besters-Dilger (2009), Hentschel & Reuther (2020); Müller & Wingender (2020, 2021) etc.

# 1. LANGUAGE SITUATION SINCE THE FULL-SCALE INVASION (2022-2024)

## THE INVASION MARKED A TURNING POINT

It is not a novelty by now that the Russian war against Ukraine has caused a change in the LANGUAGE CONSCIOUSNESS of the average Ukrainian speakers, especially among those who had Russian as L1.

Several recent studies have confirmed how the attitude towards the Russian language is deteriorating, even if compared with the years immediately preceding the war. Of course, this also depends on the regions. Certainly, a visible shift towards Russian, even among ethnic Russians, can be observed in most central-northern Regions.

(It should be pointed out, however, that a tendency towards a language shift from Russian to Ukrainian was already underway after the Majdan Revolution, the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas conflict (2014).

## **2. LANGUAGE SITUATION SINCE THE FULL-SCALE INVASION (2022-2024)**

Observation from social and mass media, suggests a noticeable shift towards Ukrainian, at least for those citizens who have not left the country before the war in search of better working conditions. However, for those speakers who throughout their lives have mainly used a local dialect or a mixed speech, it will be more difficult to make a radical decision in favour of either language.

**CURRENT STATUS** of the Ukrainian Language: most people in favour of Ukrainian as the only state language. Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism perceived by the majority as deleterious.



## OTHER TENDENCIES

The mass migration both within Ukraine and abroad (in consequence of the current war) has caused a mixing up of the population (= speakers). One can register constant migration waves from the eastern and southern regions all throughout the war period and, at the beginning of the invasion, from the northern regions.

Notwithstanding the accommodation attempts of the newcomers in the central-western regions, especially in the L'viv area, this has inevitably brought about an overlapping of different language habits and behaviours, thus complicating the assessment of the more stable trends of the regional language distribution which characterized Ukraine before 2022 (and 2014).

### **As observed and reported in a few studies:**

Another consequence of the war is the shift in the language consciousness and ethnic identity of those average speakers especially in those parts of Ukraine which used to be characterized by a **NEUTRAL ATTITUDE** towards the Russian language and culture. Moreover, Russian in certain situational contexts, is growingly associated with the enemy's languages whereas Ukrainian as a marker of national and social identity (Sokolova 2023: 5, 11).

Therefore, we believe that at present, because of the volatile language situation, it is not effective to carry out aimed sociolinguistic (and even dialectal) field research but just to describe general trends.

## WAR EFFECTS ON LANGUAGE:

The outbreak of the war (24.02.2022), like any other exceptional events and as an unexpected extra-linguistic factor, has caused a series of cultural-linguistic alterations primarily in the Ukrainian society but indirectly affecting also other cultures and languages.

☐ Lexis,

☐ Strengthening of puristic tendencies → several “anti Suržyk” programmes.

These changes are most evidently reflected in the lexis. In this two years period, the military vocabulary related to the warfare has been significantly enriched. A number of borrowings, neologisms as well as changes in meaning (semantic shift) of already existing lexemes can be noted in everyday language usage.

We highlight some, by now, most frequent loanwords and neologisms, mainly concerning war *realia*, and a few lexemes which underwent, in specific socio-pragmatic contexts, a semantic shift. The selected examples are based on social media and popular Ukrainian war songs.

## LOANWORDS (military terminology)

Ukrainian	Polish	German	Commentary
БАЙРАКТАР	<b>Bayraktar TB2</b> bezzałogowy rozpoznawczo- bojowy aparat latający	<b>Bayraktar TB2</b>	(Turkish: Bayraktar' flag bearer'); reconnaissance drone, combat drone
ДЖАВЕЛІН	<b>Javelin</b> ( <u>przeciwpancerny</u> )	<b>Javelin</b>	Anti-tank weapon
ХАЙМАРС	<b>Himars</b> system <u>artylerii</u> rakietowej wysokiej mobilności	<b>Himars</b>	(Acronym for High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) is a light multiple rocket launcher artillery system on a truck chassis

**Фото: війна збагатила словниковий запас українців (Віталій Носач/РБК-Україна)**



# NEOLOGISMS

Ukrainian	Polish	German	Commentary
<p><b>РАШИЗМ</b>            (англ. <u>Blend</u> of <u>Рáша</u> (<i>Ráša</i>, “Russia”, <i>derogatory</i>) + <u>фаши́ст</u> (<i>fašýst</i>, “fascist”)            Злочинна шовіністична ідеологія «русского мира»</p>	<p><b>Raszym</b>            (Faszym rosyjski, również <i>raszym</i>)</p>	<p><b>Word blends:</b>  <b>Raschism</b>            (Vgl. Eng. <b>Ruscism</b>; <b>Rashism</b>)</p>	<p><b>Criminal-chauvinist ideology of the “Russian world” Cf. Russkij mir</b></p>
<p><b>РАШИСТ (-И) rašist</b>            російські військові, прихильники путіна</p>	<p><b>Raszyst</b>            Ale główny raszyst z Kremla przeliczył się.</p>	<p><b>Raschist</b>            Raschja (vgl. Eng. Russia) + Faschist</p>	<p><b>Russian military / Russian soldiers, supporters of Putin</b></p>
<p><b>УКРАЇНИТИ / Ukrajinity</b>            дати жорстку відповідь на невиправдані дії</p>	<p><b>dać zdecydowaną odpowiedź na nieuzasadnione działania</b></p>	<p><b>auf ungerechtfertigte Handlungen hart reagieren</b></p>	<p><b>Making / rendering Ukrainian (to react vehemently to an unjust action)</b></p>



## **FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS ? + RECOMMENDATIONS**

At present, it is difficult to come to any firm conclusions. One can only imagine once – we hope – the war is over (and, possibly, Ukraine will have kept by then a compact territorial preservation) the following:

- ❑ A consolidation of the social status and position of the Ukrainian language.
- ❑ The role of Russian in the Ukrainian society (once a ‘serenity of judgement’ has been restored), could/should be reviewed, at least for some specific cities and areas.
- ❑ We also recommend to those who advocate a ‘super purism’ who see Suržyk in every “second utterance and word” to seek for a more objective evaluation of the historical-linguistic and dialectal heritage of Ukrainian, thus avoiding an artificial approximation to western Ukrainian varieties (→ West Slavic).

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**GRATIAS MAXIMAS VOBIS AGO**

**ありがとう**

**Arigatō**

**ДЯКУЮ ЗА УВАГУ!**