

***Choosing a Mother Tongue:
The Politics of Language and Identity in Ukraine***
Corinne A. Seals (2019)

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In *Choosing a Mother Tongue: The Politics of Language and Identity in Ukraine*, the author examines connections among language, identity, and sociopolitical positioning after the Orange Revolution and during the time of the Russo-Ukrainian war in the Donbas region.

An interesting and informative study, the book addresses two key issues: it reveals how the current events in Ukraine influence shifts in language attitude and identity, and it is based on empirical data the author collected in Ukraine and in the Ukrainian diaspora. The book is grounded in original research, which involved 38 interviews conducted by the author. As the author points out, ‘this book is a result of attempting to capture some of the dialogues taking place, and to investigate how dialogism and positioning can assist in better understanding individuals’ discursive negotiations of self’ (p. 14).

While reading the book, the polyphonic works by Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich come to mind. In Seals’s monograph, the reader can hear the voices of Ukrainians who discuss such topics as language and identity after the Orange Revolution, renegotiation of identity, and changing the mother tongue, as well as challenges to dominant language ideologies in the time of war. Through careful

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analysis of the discourse, the author makes valuable comments about the politics of language in Ukraine, linguistic accommodation, myth debunking about Western Ukraine, and young generations' preferences, among other topics.

The dedication for the *Hromada* ('community' in Ukrainian) both in Ukraine and in the diaspora who 'have spoken life into this book' reflects the author's deep involvement with the Ukrainian community and foregrounds the author's personal insight into this topic.

The book consists of eight chapters and appendices. Chapter 1, 'Historical language Ideologies and Sociopolitical Conflict in Ukraine', explores connections between language use and sociopolitical ideologies in Ukraine. It starts with a brief introduction to the turbulent history of Ukraine and its language. To provide the readers with the necessary sociolinguistic context and background for the book's arguments, the author also discusses the ideology of purism as well as *surzhyk* (a mixture of the Ukrainian and Russian languages). The author discusses how language and politics go hand in hand, and how the language issue is used by politicians to further their agenda. This sociolinguistic information is illustrated by the colorful maps of Ukrainian linguistic division, including maps of recent presidential elections in Ukraine, which help to visualize such division. In this chapter, the author also describes the theoretical framework for her study. She introduces a key research tool – Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. This theory, which is used to interpret the interaction between characters in a novel (p. 24), is very important in the book. The theory helps to analyze the participants' narratives and also takes on a broader meaning by providing the ability and willingness to listen to and hear the polyphony of one another's voices and opinions. In addition, Seals discusses another approach used in the book. This is positioning theory, which focuses on 'how individuals discursively identify and re-identify themselves and others in the relations to the events' (p. 26).

Chapter 2, 'Language and Identity after the Orange Revolution', starts with examining identity issues through the prism of Post-Structuralism and Social Constructionism. Then the author continues with analysis of imagined identities and uses this approach to discuss the sociolinguistic situation following the Orange Revolution. The author foregrounds the Orange Revolution as a turning point for many Ukrainians who became more conscious about their national identity. The chapter is based on a pilot study conducted by the author in 2009. It is interesting to note that all three female participants of the study represent ideologically and linguistically different parts of Ukraine. The pilot study allows the author to compare experiences and perspectives of a Ukrainian speaker and two Russian speakers. For one of the participants, the Ukrainian language is a part of national consciousness. For the two others, the Ukrainian language is not a part

of their Ukrainian identity. Also in this chapter, the author analyses a narrative of a speaker from Crimea who introduces a myth about Western Ukraine, where allegedly only Ukrainian is used. The pilot study is a good illustration of the complexity of the sociolinguistic situation and identity issues in Ukraine. It would be interesting to see how the findings of the study would be different if the participants included men.

After a brief introduction about the key events after Euromaidan, Chapter 3, ‘Othering and Positioning during a Time of War’, describes the study of 38 interviews conducted from 2014–2015, and how Euromaidan and the war in the Donbas has influenced the rise of national identification in Ukraine. As the author notes, her study ‘did not seek to represent the views of all Ukrainians, but instead to locate emergent trends across participants interested in discussing these sensitive issues’ (p. 55). These trends are presented in the next chapters of the book. In addition, in this chapter, the author foregrounds Bakhtin’s idea of chronotope that determines the views and reactions of the participants and brings ‘the listener into the events of the war’ (p. 62). Along with this theoretical approach, this chapter considers at least two main issues. First is the discussion of the naming of events. The author points out that the words ‘crisis’, ‘conflict’, or ‘war’ reveal participants’ positions and symbolic values. Second, this chapter introduces the ideology that ‘Being Ukrainian is speaking Ukrainian’, which is developed further in the next chapters. For many Ukrainians, speaking Ukrainian became a necessary part of Ukrainian identity after the war started. At the same time, the author underscores the complexity of positioning and belonging, as well as the complexity of identity itself, which is reflected in the following modifiers: multiple, fluid, dynamic, complex, conflicting, interpersonal, translational, shifting, developing, etc.

Chapter 4, ‘Who’s Responsible? The Politics of Language’, places language issues in the context of the current Ukrainian sociopolitical situation. It considers linguistic strategies such as metonymy, personification, or repetition used by participants in order to determine who is responsible for the war. The researcher provides interesting examples of how the use of metonymies such as ‘Russia’, ‘Ukraine’ and ‘Putin’ creates a collective identity, a category of people. Another interesting example from this chapter is the analysis of multiple discourses, which reveal diverse opinions, feelings, and perceptions regarding responsibility for the war in Ukraine.

Chapter 5, ‘Renegotiating Identity and “Changing Your Mother Tongue”’, examines connections between national identity, language choice, and national allegiance. It offers insight into a unique practice and ideological movement – changing one’s mother tongue. It starts with a brief discussion of the term *ridna*

mova ('mother tongue', 'native language' in Ukrainian) and then describes the master narrative that 'Ukrainian language is a part of Ukrainian identity' as well as highlights positive language attitudes and shift towards Ukrainian among Russophones after Euromaidan. It is a fascinating reading which reveals a diversity of sociolinguistic choice. For some, their language choice is a conscious choice; for others, it is part of their heritage; and for others still, it is a political statement. All of these narratives show a key theme – the increasing importance of the Ukrainian language in national identity after Euromaidan and Russian aggression against Ukraine. The same findings – greater appreciation of Ukrainian as a national language – are also reported in Kulyk's (2016) research based on mass surveys and focus group discussions.

Chapter 6, 'Investment and Loyalty in the Ukrainian Diaspora', concentrates on analysis of data from the diaspora community. It starts with a brief overview of diaspora and transnational research, followed by a discussion of a model of immigrant integration. The author describes the participants' efforts and challenges in integrating into host countries. The most interesting part of this chapter is the discussion on language ideologies, challenges in integration into the host society, the construction of a Ukrainian collective identity, and positioning oneself in the diaspora. For many participants, this process is complicated by Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism and Ukrainian diglossia (modern Ukrainian and diaspora Ukrainian). The chapter deals with diverse stories, but there is one thing which unites these narratives – loyalty to the Ukrainian community in which both Russian and Ukrainian languages are welcomed.

Chapter 7, 'It doesn't Matter What You Speak: Challenges to Dominant Language Ideologies by Ukrainian Young Adults', is a counter discourse to the ideology, 'Real Ukrainians speak Ukrainian'. It deals with the ideology of language detached from national identity and the complexity of the Ukrainian situation since the war started. The author offers an analysis of friendly non-accommodation, which allows the simultaneous use of Ukrainian and Russian. In this chapter, Seals also returns to the myth that Russian is not welcomed in Western Ukraine. She describes the multilingual acceptance reflected in the participants' interviews, which dispels this common myth about the West. In addition, she provides an interesting example of linguistic flash mobs when people in dominant Ukrainophone areas spoke Russian and vice versa – people in dominant Russian-speaking areas spoke Ukrainian in order to show support and solidarity across the country. Another interesting example provided in the chapter is Russian-speaking volunteers who help in the war. Through the use of narratives, the author reveals that the language one speaks is not equivalent to one's social and political position. The ideology, 'It does not matter what

language one speaks', is reflected in linguistic practices by many Russophones who view themselves as part of the Ukrainian nation but do not give up their daily language preferences (Kulyk, 2016).

Chapter 8, 'Conclusion', provides concluding remarks and a brief summary of all the chapters. Furthermore, the author provides suggestions for future scholarship and research regarding the theoretical framework, the need to consider local and global trends in analyzing discourse, and the importance of further mother tongue research. The author concludes on the very optimistic note of Ukrainian perseverance and 'willingness to invest in a new future' (p. 185). And this is exactly what this book is about – perseverance in embracing new challenges amidst sociopolitical upheavals.

In sum, the book is a colorful mosaic of different voices, discourses and narratives which together create a picture of complex and multifaceted linguistic practices in Ukraine and the Ukrainian diaspora. This well-written study, firmly grounded in theory, will be of great interest to circles of linguists, sociolinguists, anthropologists and professionals who are doing similar research. At the same time, this interesting read is intended for a general audience who would like to discover the multilayered Ukrainian linguistic community.

Reference

Kulyk, V. (2016) Language and identity in Ukraine after Euromaidan. *Thesis Eleven* 136(1): 90–106.

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