

Surzhyk: Attitudes & Usage Among Ukrainian People

Kateryna Kravchenko *Brigham Young University*
Joseph A. Stanley *Brigham Young University*

What is Surzhyk?

- ❖ refers to a range of **macaronic** (mixed) sociolects of Ukrainian and Russian languages
- ❖ originally meant **mixing of two different types of flour** (wheat and rye), which is considered a lower grade flour
- ❖ there is no unifying set of characteristics
- ❖ the term is used for **norm-breaking**, non-obedience to or non-awareness of the rules of the Ukrainian and Russian standard languages
- ❖ it is not Russian-accented Ukrainian

Literature Review

- ❖ Most research is focused on morphosyntax and typology (Flier 1998, Bilaniuk 1998, 2004; Kent 2010, 2012; Hentschel & Palinska 2022)
- ❖ Lack of governmental support leads to linguistic stigmatization; described as a virus and part of Russia's systemic linguicide. (Flier 1998).
- ❖ "Crippled", "harmful parasite", "dulls people", "primitivizes thought" (Bilaniuk 1998)
- ❖ "The State has to ensure the comprehensive development and functioning of the Ukrainian language in all spheres of social life throughout the entire territory of Ukraine"
(Constitution of Ukraine, art. 10)
- ❖ Surzhyk is often associated with a lack of education, Ukrainian is gaining more prestige, but Russian still has a high status (Bilaniuk, 1997)

2022 Invasion of Ukraine

- ❖ A continuation of a decade's worth of war: the Revolution of Dignity, occupation and annexation of Crimea, war in Donbas, full-scale invasion
- ❖ In the past 373 days, 8 million Ukrainians have fled their homeland and tens of thousands have died (on both sides)
- ❖ Change in linguistic attitudes towards Russian and Ukrainian.
- ❖ Presumably a change in attitudes towards Surzhyk as well.

Research Questions

RQ1: When and where do people use Surzhyk in 2022 Ukraine? In other words, what are the domains of usage?

RQ2: What are the attitudes toward Surzhyk among the Ukrainian population and how have they changed in the last two decades?

Outline of this talk:

- ❖ Study 1: Domains of Use
- ❖ Study 2: Attitudes
- ❖ Discussion
- ❖ Conclusion

Study 1: Domains of Use

Methods

- ❖ 15 Ukrainians (ages 18-60) residing in Ukraine prior to February 24
- ❖ 2 questionnaires
- ❖ Semi-structured interview (in Ukrainian)

- ❖ Domains of language use ▶
(adapted from Ivanova, 2013)
- ❖ The participants were asked to rate how comfortable they would be speaking Surzhyk in each of proposed settings

Domains of language use	
OS	Communicating in official/ formal situations
P	With a policeman
B	In a bank
D	At the doctor's
C	With clients
CE	In cultural establishments
UP	With an unknown person
W	At work
S	In the shop
St	In the street
F	With friends

Results

Generally, a **more casual** setting of language use means people are **more likely to be comfortable** using Surzhyk:

- ❖ With friends and family
- ❖ “In the shop” was one of the most common domains
- ❖ None of the participants indicated domain “Official/formal situation” as acceptable setting for speaking Surzhyk
- ❖ “With policeman” was not considered casual by Ivanova (2013), but people said they would be comfortable speaking Surzhyk

Results

“Суржик це як сленг. Я ж не буду в робочому імейлі до керівництва писати лол, чи щось таке. Тому на роботі українська, суржик вдома.”

“Surzhyk is like slang. I’m not going to use “lol” in a work email to my boss, or something like that. So it’s Ukrainian at work, Surzhyk at home.”

Study 2: Attitudes

Methods

- ❖ Same interviews and participants as in Study 1.
- ❖ Questionnaire about attitudes towards Surzhyk ► (adapted from Liu & Zhao, 2011)
- ❖ Original study looked at the attitudes of Chinese people toward Chinese-English mixing
- ❖ Adapted to fit the language situation in Ukraine
- ❖ Statements were used as a part of semi-structured interview

I feel less patriotic when I use Surzhyk.
Я не відчуваю себе патріотом, коли спілкуюсь за допомогою суржикю.

At times I fear that by using Surzhyk I will become like a foreigner.
Іноді мене бентежить те, що через суржик я буду здаватися іноземцем.

I do not feel awkward when using Surzhyk.
Я не відчуваю незручність, коли використовую суржик.

I'd like to see Surzhyk used and represented in media.
Мені б хотілося, щоб суржик використовували в медіа.

Surzhyk sounds very nice.
Суржик звучить мелодійно.

Surzhyk is an important aspect of Ukrainian culture.
Суржик – це важливий аспект української культури.

I wish that I could speak pure and fluent Ukrainian.
Мені б хотілося мати можливість спілкуватися чистою українською мовою.

Surzhyk is a sign of uneducated person.
Суржик – ознака неосвіченої людини.

Results

Insufficient knowledge of Ukrainian is a key factor that encourages the use of Surzhyk in communication:

- ❖ “Більшість так пишуть і розмовляють бо вони не знають правил”
- ❖ “Щоб твоя українська була милозвучною, її треба спочатку вивчити”
- ❖ “Раніше я більше спілкувалась російською, я досі часто використовую російські слова. Бо я не можу швидко згадати український варіант”
- ❖ “Most write and speak this way because they do not know the rules”
- ❖ “In order for Ukrainian language to sound good, it must first be learned”
- ❖ “I used to speak Russian more, and I still use Russian words quite often, because I can't remember the Ukrainian equivalent quickly enough”

Negative Attitudes

Most participants expressed that language purity is important to them:

- ❖ “Я вважаю, що мова має бути чистою, без помилок”
- ❖ “Суржик мене бісить”
- ❖ “Не люблю, коли розмовляють на суржику”
- ❖ “Ненавиджу, коли українську мову спотворюють російськими словами”
- ❖ “In my opinion, language should be clean, without errors”
- ❖ “Surzhyk irritates me”
- ❖ “I don’t like when people speak Surzhyk”
- ❖ “I hate to hear when Ukrainian language get distorted with Russian words”

Negative Attitudes

“Я вживаю багато русизмів там, де вони не потрібні. Я намагаюсь не вживати їх і кажу людям: якщо можна їх замінити більш українською версією, скажіть мені, будь ласка”

“I use a lot of Russianisms where they are not needed. I try to not use them, and I say to people: if they can be replaced with a more Ukrainian equivalent, tell me, please”

Positive Attitudes

- ❖ Positive attitude towards those people who are in the process of learning to speak “pure” Ukrainian
- ❖ Referred to Surzhyk as a “transitional period” between speaking Russian in the past and switching to Ukrainian only:

“Якщо людина реально старається, я думаю шо це класно, це варто поваги. В таких випадках я взагалі не проти суржику. Я навіть за”

“If a person is trying their best, I think it is cool, it is admirable. I don't mind Surzhyk at all in cases like this. I'm all for it, even”

❖ “Я поважаю всіх, хто намагається **перейти на українську після того, як почалась війна**. У таких людей є чітка громадянська позиція. Моральні цінності. Для цього потрібен час, багато практики. Це нормально, що спочатку буде важко.”

❖ “До повномасштабного вторгнення я взагалі майже не розмовляла українською, тільки в школі. А потім як задумалася, чому ми в Україні взагалі розмовляємо російською, мені аж моторошно стало. Ми всі русифіковані! Тому тепер суржик мій кращий друг, українською я дуже повільно думаю.”

❖ “I respect everyone who is trying to **switch to speaking Ukrainian after the war started**.

These people have a strong sense of civic engagement.¹ Personal morals. It takes time, a lot of practice. It’s understandable that they will struggle at first.”

¹lit. “civic position”

❖ “Before the full-scale invasion I almost never spoke Ukrainian, only in school. And then when I thought about why we speak Russian in Ukraine at all, I felt uneasy. We were all Russified! So now Surzhyk is my best friend, because when I think in Ukrainian I’m too slow.”

Discussion

- ❖ Parallels post-Soviet attitudes, except Surzhyk is doing better.
- ❖ “Language itself can function as such a symbol for which some are ready to die or kill.” (Tabouret-Keller 1997:319)
- ❖ “People are motivated to adjust their speech style, or accommodate, as means of expressing values, attitudes, and intentions towards others. [...] A shift away from the other’s style of speech represents divergence and is considered often a tactic of social dissociation.” (Giles 1982:105)

Conclusion

- ❖ People are more comfortable with speaking Surzhyk in more casual settings. Surzhyk is inappropriate for official settings.
- ❖ Many people still have negative views about Surzhyk and think it is associated with lack of education, but negative attitudes towards Russian now also play a big role.
- ❖ Positive attitudes are associated with viewing Surzhyk as a “transitional tool” towards speaking Ukrainian instead of Russian.
- ❖ Parallels with post-Soviet era, but with Surzhyk perhaps doing better than before.

References

- Bilaniuk, Laada. "Speaking of" Surzhyk": Ideologies and Mixed Languages." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 21.1/2 (1997): 93-117.
- Bilaniuk, Laada. "A typology of Surzhyk: Mixed Ukrainian-Russian language." *International Journal of Bilingualism* 8.4 (2004): 409-425.
- Bilaniuk, Laada M. 1998. *The Politics of Language and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Ph.D. Dissertation.
- Flier, Michael S. "Surzhyk: The rules of engagement." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 22 (1998): 113-136.
- Hentschel, Gerd & Olesya Palinska. 2022. Restructuring in a Mesolect: A Case Study on the Basis of the Formal Variation of the Infinitive in Ukrainian–Russian Surzhyk. *Cognitive Studies | Études cognitives* (22). <https://doi.org/10.11649/cs.2770>.
- Ivanova, Olga. "Bilingualism in Ukraine: defining attitudes to Ukrainian and Russian through geographical and generational variations in language practices." *Sociolinguistic studies* 7.3 (2013): 249.
- Kent, Kateryna. "Language contact: Morphosyntactic analysis of Surzhyk spoken in Central Ukraine." *LSO Working Papers in Linguistics* 8 (2010): 33-53.
- Kent, Kateryna. 2012. *Morphosyntactic analysis of Surzhyk, a Russian-Ukrainian mixed lect*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Ph.D. Dissertation.

Дякую!

Kateryna Kravchenko

kateryna.kravchenko@byu.edu

Brigham Young University

Joseph A. Stanley

joeystanley@byu.edu

Brigham Young University

@joeystan

Слава Україні!

Sláva Ukraїni!

