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LANGUAGE PRACTICES AND PREFERENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN WARTIME UKRAINE

PRAKTYKI I PREFERENCJE JĘZYKOWE MŁODYCH LUDZI W UKRAINIE W CZASIE WOJNY

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Abstract:

This article presents the results of an analysis of current trends in language use among young Ukrainians based on data from representative sociological studies of recent years. It underscores shifts in language skills (proficiency in Ukrainian, Russian, English), communication preferences, and engagement with cultural content. The wartime language practices and choices of young Ukrainians mirror the socio-cultural shifts within society, related to the changing linguistic landscape, emotional and cognitive responses to the Russian language due to Russia's military aggression, an inclination towards Ukrainian cultural products, and the increasing use of Ukrainian and English online.

Keywords:

Young People, Language Practices, Language Competences, Changes in Language Preferences, Russia's War against Ukraine.

Abstrakt:

W artykule przedstawiono wyniki analizy aktualnych trendów w użyciu języka przez młodych Ukraińców w oparciu o dane z reprezentatywnych badań socjologicznych przeprowadzonych w ostatnich latach. Zwraca on uwagę na zmiany w kompetencjach językowych, takich jak: biegłość w językach ukraińskim, rosyjskim i angielskim, oraz preferencje językowe w komunikacji i konsumpcji kultury. Praktyki językowe młodzieży w czasie wojny odzwierciedlają społeczno-kulturowe przemiany w Ukrainie, które są odpowiedzią na dynamiczną sytuację językową, emocjonalne i refleksyjne reakcje na język rosyjski po agresji Rosji, zainteresowanie produktami kulturowymi w języku ukraińskim oraz wzrost obecności języka ukraińskiego i angielskiego w cyfrowym świecie.

Słowa kluczowe:

młodzież, praktyki językowe, kompetencje językowe, zmiany preferencji językowych, wojna Rosji z Ukrainą.

Introduction

During wartime, Ukraine has experienced intricate processes of reevaluation of public perspectives on the significance of Ukrainian

culture and language within society. These processes encompass a reexamination of historical events, a critical review of the cultural canon that has been significant since the Soviet era, and the establishment of new commemorative

practices and heroes. A pivotal issue being revisited is the role and suitability of the Russian language in official communications and public life. The Constitution designates Ukrainian as the state language. Since gaining independence, the use of Ukrainian or Russian in everyday private communication has largely continued to adhere to established background habits, which may differ across various regions. The proclamation of Ukrainian as the sole state language did not imply the exclusion of Russian speakers (Polese, 2011) or a significant alteration in linguistic practices regarding the consumption of cultural products. Attitudes towards bilingualism have persisted; for instance, according to a 2017 survey, 23% of respondents stated that they would watch TV programs exclusively in Ukrainian (67% in the western regions), 13% exclusively in Russian, 33% in both Ukrainian and Russian, and 29% in either Ukrainian or Russian (Skokova, 2018, p. 70).

However, this coexistence has been eclipsed by media-driven debates and concrete measures to elevate the status of Russian in Ukraine's political arena. Meanwhile, the Russian Federation persists in using the defense of Russian-speaking citizens' rights to justify its military aggression.

The bilingual practices in public life and media, such as TV shows co-hosted by Russian and Ukrainian-speaking presenters, supported the coexistence of the Ukrainian and Russian languages. Russian-origin products and Russian-language media were prominently featured in Ukraine's cultural landscape, including TV series, entertainment programs, music, and print media. This predominance of Russian cultural products often shaped the population's preferences and tastes.

Since Ukraine gained independence, the *soft* and gradual implementation of the Ukrainian language has produced ambiguous effects. It has mitigated potential conflicts by allowing social interactions to continue under established linguistic norms specific to each region or local institution. However, it has also led to a lack of adequate institutional support for the growth

of Ukrainian-language cultural activities. Moreover, there has been a deficiency in promoting scientifically informed perspectives on Ukraine's linguistic dynamics across different historical periods. Additionally, there have been no efforts to foster a common vision among citizens of diverse linguistic backgrounds regarding the future of Ukrainian culture and language amidst national and international dynamics.

Analyzing the recent shifts in linguistic attitudes and practices among Ukrainian young people could yield insightful results. As the demographic most receptive to social innovations and shifts in public discourse, young people tend to share their perspectives and emotions more freely. Their lack of experience of the Soviet era, a time when Russian was the predominant language in public life and signified education and urbanity, shapes their view of the linguistic environment. Today's young people are socialized in an independent Ukraine, where Ukrainian is increasingly prominent in education and public life. The war in Ukraine has introduced new dynamics relating to the attitudes toward and usage of the Ukrainian and Russian languages.

Methodology

This article draws on analysis of data from representative surveys of the adult population, primarily utilizing data from the *Ukrainian Society* sociological monitoring (1992–2024) conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (for more see Vorona & Reznik, 2021). In this context, the term *young people* is used to refer to individuals aged 18 to 29, although data from the Infosapiens center survey on the age group 16–35 were also considered. Information from published press releases concerning studies by various sociological and analytical centers, such as the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, Sociological Group Rating, Infosapiens, Detector Media and Centre

for Content Analysis, was utilized. These sources offer insights into the language practices and attitudes of young people and enable the results across different studies to be compared.

The linguistic landscape in Ukraine. The linguistic dynamics in Ukraine are shaped by communication needs fulfilled using one or more languages. The Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine considers the language used in domestic settings as one of the indicators of the country's linguistic landscape. Surveys of Ukrainian society revealed that in 1996, 37% of participants primarily used Ukrainian at home, 33% spoke Russian, and 30% used both languages. Additionally, the

proportion of respondents who reported speaking other languages at home ranged from 0.2% to 3% over various years.

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, the ethno-cultural composition of Ukraine's population has shifted. This has also affected the structure of monitoring samples, as the populations of occupied Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, predominantly Russian-speaking areas, were not available for surveys. Consequently, the language indicators' dynamics since 2014 only reflect the areas under the Ukrainian government's control.

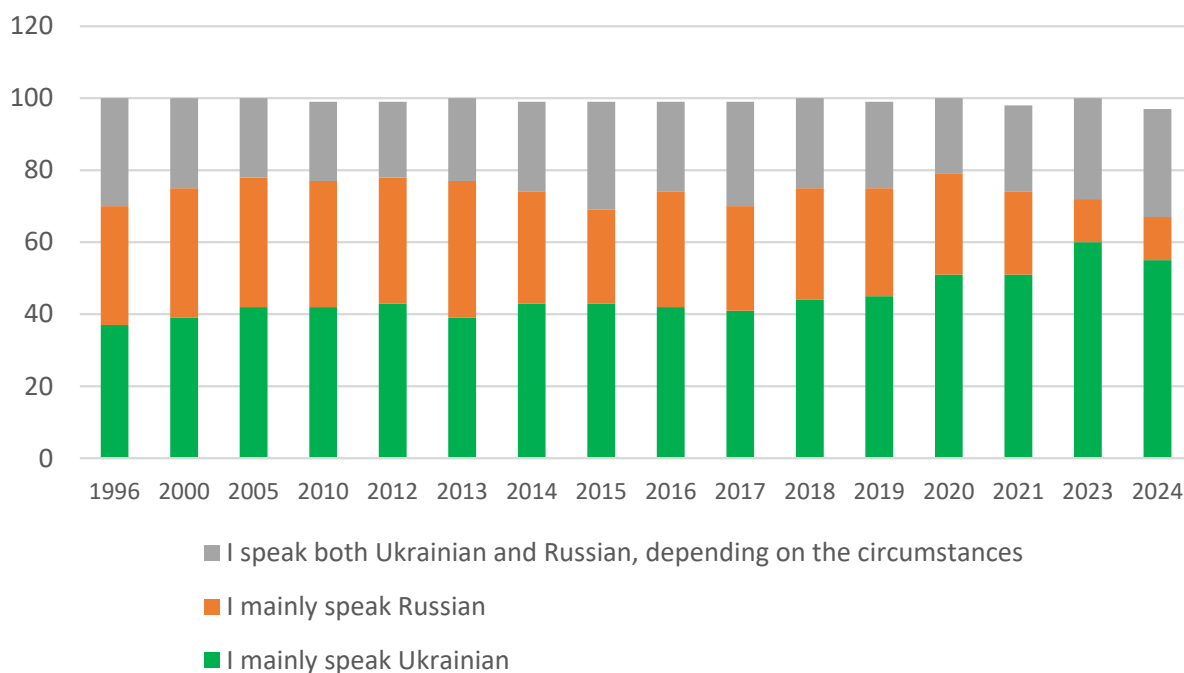


Figure 1. Answers to the question: *What language(s) do you mainly speak in your family (at home)?*, 1996–2024, %.

Source: *Ukrainian Society Scientific Journal* published by the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine.

* The data for 2023 are based on Rating Group, 2023, p. 14.

** The 2024 survey of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the results of which are used in this article, was conducted by the Sociological Group Rating agency at the request of the Communications Transformation project with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The proportion of responses regarding the language of communication in the family is gradually changing. In the period from 2014 to 2019,

at least 40% of respondents stated that they spoke mainly Ukrainian in their family circle, and after 2020, this figure increased to 51–60%.

More than two years of full-scale war since February 2024 have led to a change in the composition of the population due to large-scale external migration and the occupation of some Ukrainian territories. Recent surveys show a decline in the predominance of Russian-speaking reports, now at 12%. Additionally, 28–29% of participants report using both Ukrainian and Russian. The responses from the youth demographic, ages 18–29, align closely with the overall participant answers. Thus, in the context of war in Ukraine, the three main styles of private communication continue to be Ukrainian, Russian, or a combination of both, contingent on the context. Overall, there is an emerging trend of Ukrainian becoming the dominant language of communication at home.

The dynamics of language competence

In public spaces, official institutions, and during information consumption, the language used may vary from that in private communication. Linguistic competence, defined as the degree of proficiency in one or more languages, affects the choice of communication language at an individual level. The historical trajectory of Ukraine’s linguistic landscape has led to a situation where most of the population speak both Ukrainian and Russian, with varying proficiency levels. Other languages, including English, are less commonly used. Monitoring data from 2013 and 2019 can be utilized to analyze shifts in the dynamics of language competence self-assessments (figure 2).

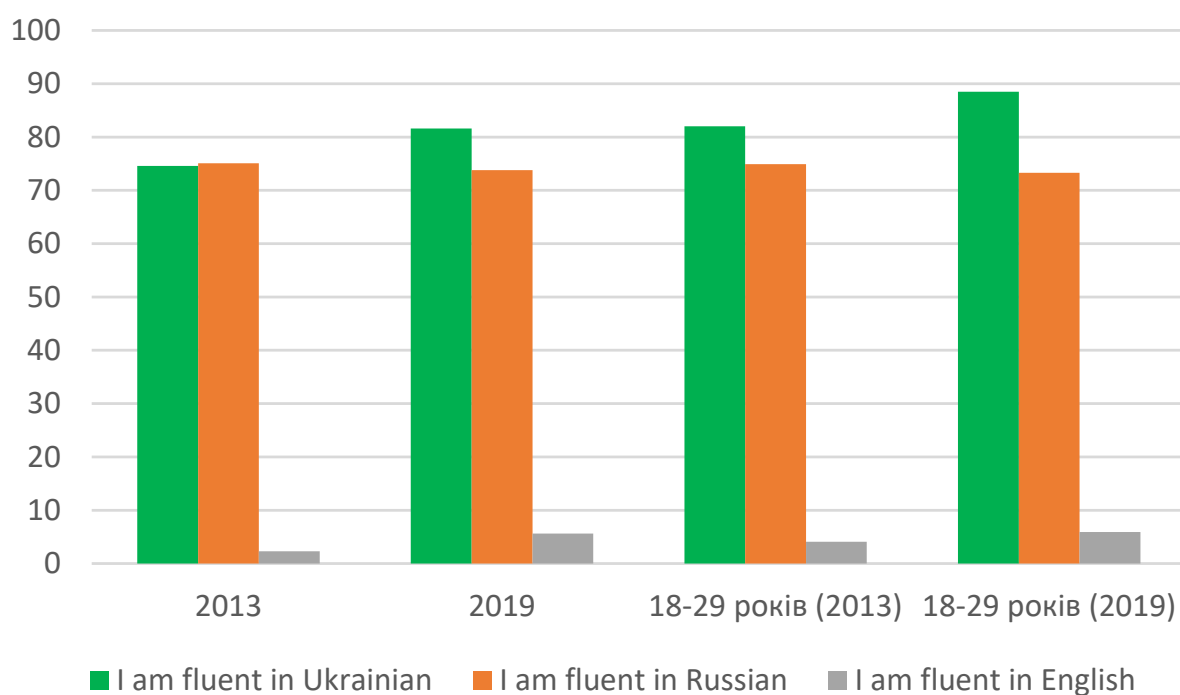


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who stated that they can speak, read and write fluently in Ukrainian, Russian and English, 2013, 2019, %.

Source: *Ukrainian Society Scientific Journal* published by the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine.

The survey results show that the percentage of individuals reporting fluency in Ukrainian rose from 75% in 2013 to 82% in 2019. For young people, the increase was from 82% to 89% over the same period. The percentage of those claiming fluency in Russian held steady at 75%. This consistency was observed in the youth demographic as well. There were scarcely any individuals who did not understand either Ukrainian or Russian. Nonetheless, in 2019, about 18% of participants reported difficulties in communicating in Ukrainian, with this figure being 11% among the younger population. Proficiency in the English language was reported as follows: in 2013, 66% claimed they barely understood English, which decreased to 51% in 2019. Among young people, the percentage was lower. In 2013, 42% stated that they had no knowledge of English, and this figure was 34% in 2019. Concurrently, fluency among the young population was at 6% in 2019, with an additional 60% possessing some skills in reading, writing, and speaking English.

A 2023 KIIS survey confirmed that nearly half of the adult population (49%) had no proficiency in English (refer to figure 3). Twenty-three percent of participants reported abilities in reading, writing, and both everyday and professional communication in English. The proficiency rate is higher among young people, at 39%. Notably, 22% of young people stated that they did not speak English, marking a 15% decrease from the 2019 survey conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine.

Without this data, it can be seen that English language learning orientations are more widespread among young people than among other age groups. Globalization in education, the economy and the labor market encourages parents to pay attention to providing their children with a quality education that includes learning foreign languages. In addition, the wide circulation of English-language information and popular culture products, as well as free access to it online, increase young people's interest in English.

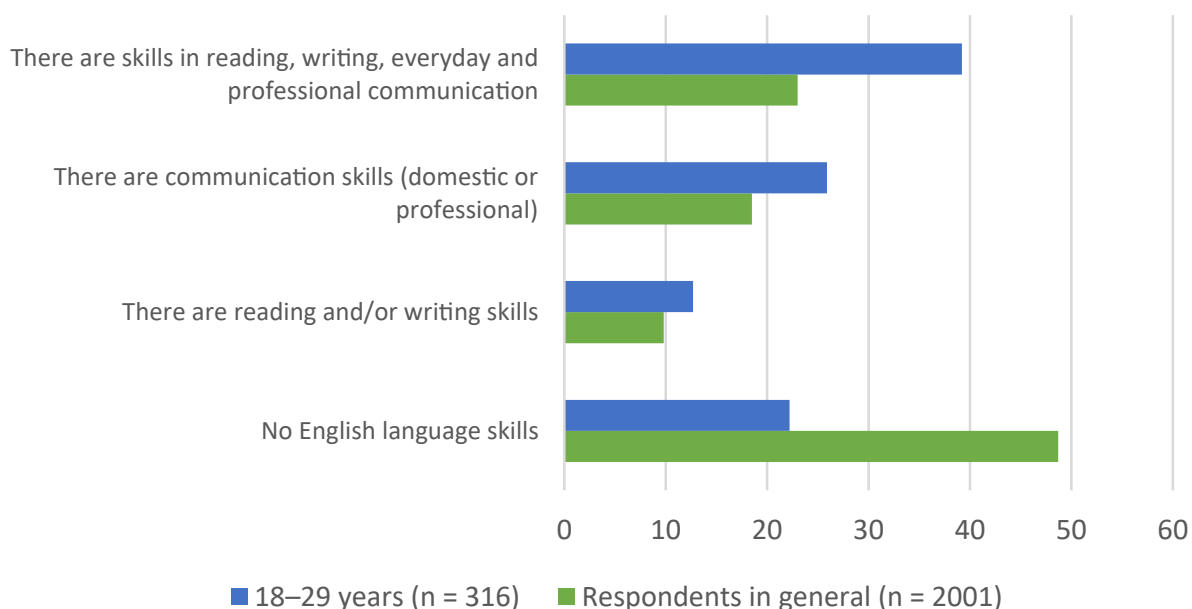


Figure 3. Proficiency in English among respondents aged 18 and older; among young people aged 18–29, 2023, %

Source: KIIS (2023).

The use of Ukrainian, Russian, and English in different social contexts

A 2023 survey by Infosapiens, targeting individuals aged 16 to 35, provides insight into language preferences based on the setting (Info Sapiens, 2023). In public spaces, 93% speak Ukrainian, and 22% speak Russian, with multiple responses allowed. In private conversations with family and friends, 32% use Russian, while Ukrainian is spoken by 76-84%, as shown in table 1.

Between 23–30% of young people engage with social media content in English, such as viewing posts or videos, while 13% use English to comment on these platforms. Russian is the language of choice for 41–50% of young people when it comes to watching videos or engaging with content on social media. For their own comments on social media, 18% of young people use Russian.

An examination of the language used in social media posts reveals that in 2020, Ukrainian was used in 15% of posts and Russian in 85%. By 2022, the figures had shifted to 45% for Ukrainian and

Table 1.

Answers to the question: *What language or languages do you usually speak/use in the following situations?* (multiple answers are possible for each line), young people aged 16–35, 2023, %

Situations	Ukrainian	Russian	English
When interacting with other people in public places, such as in a shop, on the street, etc.	93	22	4
When watching videos on social media	93	50	30
When reading/consuming content on social media other than videos	92	41	23
When you publish a post or comment on social media	88	18	13
With friends	84	32	3
With your parents or guardians	76	32	1

Source: Info Sapiens, 2023, p. 22.

55% for Russian. In 2023, Ukrainian usage slightly surpassed Russian, at 51% to 49%. In 2024, the trend continued, with Ukrainian at 59% and Russian at 41% (Content Analysis Centre, 2023; Ukrinform, 2024). This data indicates the overall language preferences among users, not segmented by age. A comparison with a survey on language preferences among young people on social media (refer to table 1) suggests that young people tend to use Ukrainian more frequently in their comments.

Hence, the preference for selecting Ukrainian for private and public communication is evident, even if this is sometimes only a declarative choice. Russian and English are frequently used concurrently by young people, particularly in consuming informational and cultural content. This trend

may suggest a diversification of communication styles among young people, with English becoming an addition to the use of Ukrainian, Russian, or bilingualism, especially in digital environments.

Changes in the choice of language and sources of cultural consumption

The KIIS survey in early 2023 posed the question: *How has the Russian-Ukrainian war affected your cultural practices?*. Responses related to consumption content were: *I have begun listening to Ukrainian music more* (56%), and *I have begun reading more books by Ukrainian authors* (22%).

Within the 18–29 age demographic, 75% reported an increased frequency in listening to Ukrainian music, while 30% stated that they read more books by Ukrainian authors (KIIS, 2023a).

The Ukrainian Media Literacy Index 2020–2023 (fourth wave), conducted regularly by Detector Media (Detector Media, 2024), has shown notable shifts in the media consumption patterns of the population. According to the respondents, there is an increased preference for Ukrainian-made productions (54%), content related to Ukrainian history and culture (45%), and Ukrainian popular music (52%). The study indicates a decline in the consumption of Russian cultural products. According to the data, 79% of participants have ceased watching Russian opposition media, 85% have stopped viewing official Russian media, and 69% have abandoned Russian media altogether, including Russian pop music. This data reflects the general atmosphere of rejection of Russian against the backdrop of deaths and injuries of numerous Ukrainian citizens, daily rocket attacks and destruction. In such circumstances, Russian media and cultural products often evoke negative emotions in many people, not to mention often spreading disinformation.

Conclusions

This article is a contribution to the analysis of monitoring data on the dynamics of language practices and attitudes towards the use of Ukrainian, Russian (and English) among young people in Ukrainian society in wartime. The subject of abandoning the Russian language in favor of Ukrainian is highly relevant and elicits numerous emotions at both individual and collective levels. Through their professional and civic activities in the country and internationally, cultural activists (writers, scholars, educators, artists, volunteers, social media promoters, etc.) prove the importance of preserving, developing and popularizing the Ukrainian language, which continued to exist in

the shadow of the Russian language even once independence was gained.

The shift from Russian to Ukrainian language usage is influenced by factors such as civic identity, the pursuit of national and cultural resurgence, and foreign policy preferences. Previous studies have shown that those individuals who emphasize the importance of supporting the Ukrainian language are also proud to be citizens of Ukraine, value the idea of national and cultural revival, and are in favor of Western European integration (Kostenko, 2020; Reznik, 2021).

At the everyday level, the voluntary abandonment of the habit of speaking Russian in private communication and consumption of cultural products is a massive shift, which is confirmed by survey data obtained by various research facilities in the relevant projects. The comparison of the data presented in this article reinforces the evidence of a shift in the configuration of language usage styles in favor of Ukrainian, along with an increase in bilingual practices due to the decline in predominantly Russian usage. A significant point is the emphasis on the growing popularity of English, especially among young people. This adds new aspects to the understanding of the configuration of the current linguistic landscape in Ukraine, which is part of the globalized world.

At the same time, it is emphasized that language skills are habitual and for many citizens it is problematic to change them overnight as a result of a rational decision. The majority of Ukrainian citizens are emotionally exhausted in the context of war because of the loss of human life, the severance of family and friendship ties due to internal and international migration, and living in a state of uncertainty. In this situation, the accusations that are occasionally made in everyday communication or on social media about the inability of some ordinary citizens to speak Ukrainian (often picked up and broadcast by the media) should be addressed primarily to the political elite. They are the consequences of an

ambivalent cultural policy that was explicitly and implicitly aimed at keeping Ukraine in the orbit of the former Soviet cultural space, especially before the Russian aggression in 2014.

The results of this analysis can be practically useful for developing a balanced, responsible, and transparent language policy for the Ukrainian state. This policy should consider the resource capabilities of representatives from various social groups, particularly young people, with differing levels of cultural capital, diverse biographical backgrounds, and regional or territorial linguistic environments. Supporting and promoting competitive cultural products in the Ukrainian language, funding education, science, and culture on a non-final basis, emphasizing non-interference in the private lives of citizens, and creating opportunities for cultural engagement and civic activity in local communities are essential guidelines that democratic cultural policy.

Currently, the dynamics of Ukrainian, Russian, and English usage among young people remain fluid, which undoubtedly requires further sociological observation. The situation depends primarily on the maintenance of Ukrainian sovereignty, the well-being of its citizens, and young people's prospects for continuing life in Ukraine and envisioning their and their children's futures there. A 2024 survey by the Institute of Sociology of the NAS of Ukraine revealed that when young people were asked, *What unites Ukrainian society today?*, the majority mentioned *shared life challenges* (46%), *a sense of lost normalcy* (54%), and *hope for a better future* (56%). It is evident that despite the loss of tens of thousands of lives in the war and the disruption of daily security, a notable portion of young people remain hopeful for the future.

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