I. Rozprawy i analizy

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Ukrainian as Border Protection: A Psycholinguistic Aspect

Język ukraiński jako ochrona granic państwa – aspekt psycholingwistyczny

Abstract: The article presents a contemporary psycholinguistic analysis of linguistic awareness of Ukrainians performed by using the stimulus word *mova* 'language'. It showcases the outcomes of an associative study conducted among Ukrainians towards the end of 2022. The findings of the experiment highlight the actual associative content linked with the concept of LANGUAGE. The resulting associative field encompasses reactions that can be divided into several semantic groups featuring national, ethnic, emotional, folkloristic, and activity-based components as well as a sphere revealing diverse language functions. Additionally, this study addresses the issues of language identity and language consciousness in the light of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Keywords: stimulus word; associative meaning; free associative experiment; native-language identification; language policy; language consciousness

1. Introduction

Prior to the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Ukrainian media frequently covered the topic of language, discussing its status and function

as a means of daily communication. In light of the full-scale invasion on Ukrainian territory, it became apparent to Ukrainians that language serves as a tool for manipulation in the hands of Russia: where Russian is spoken, so does extend their influence and power.[1] This fact encourages Ukrainians to use the Ukrainian language more consciously. Ukrainians have come to recognize the immense power of language in general and their own language in particular, as it has come to serve as a defining boundary for the state. For the Ukrainian people, their mother tongue is increasingly viewed as a protective talisman for the nation, it is a determining factor in shaping the collective consciousness and sense of belonging to the Ukrainian nation.[2]

The present study is topical inasmuch as the current military situation (in 2025) has once again compelled Ukrainians to defend their freedom and right to self-governance. Those circumstances hold particular importance for many Ukrainians as they prompt a heightened sense of self-awareness, with more conscious attention being paid to their unique culture, territory, and language, where the latter indeed plays a paramount role. The purpose of our research is to examine the actual role of the Ukrainian language within the information framework of Ukrainians. Specifically, we inquire into how its associative domain is formed, and whether political conditions exert an influence on the associative field of *mova* 'language' as a stimulus word.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The Ukrainian language as a component of Ukrainian national identity

The use of language is influenced by the social and political context, a process that can be traced throughout Ukrainian history. The constant policy on the part of Russia of prohibiting the use of Ukrainian for centuries, as well as of diminishing its prestige and social status among Ukrainians, is a clear manifestation of such influence. It is not possible to understand the issue of language as a component of Ukrainian national identity without taking into account the historical prerequisites for the functioning of Ukrainian in Ukraine. Several authors, sociolinguists and political scientists, have

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[1] This stance can be classified as Putin's "linguistic doctrine", according to which all speakers of Russian, regarldess of their location, belong to *russkiy mir*.

[2] Several aspects relating to the use of language, and specifically the situation of Ukrainian in the circumstances of the Russo-Ukrainian war, are surveyed and analyzed in contributions to Azhnyuk (2024), Izotova and Potapenko (2024), or Shumytska and Kruglov (2025). An important area of discussion in many chapters in those volumes is the role of Ukrainian in building, shaping, and safeguarding not only Ukrainian identity but Ukraine as an independent state.

extensively explored matters pertaining to language and the construction of national identity.

In his book *Linguistic Culture and Language Policy*, Harold F. Schiffman (1996) delves into the intricate realm of language policy as a social construct, rooted in beliefs, attitudes and myths. The scholar sheds light on how culture-specific language policies evolve over time, exercising a profound impact on people's lives. According to Elana Shohamy (2006: 23), policies concerning language use are being tested, with ever increasing intensity, in an era of migration and cultural interaction. Taking into account the heterogeneity, changeability, and often contradictory factors that influence the proponents of language policy (especially in the sense of the political and ideological aspect), Shohamy studied the influence that language policy has on citizens, how it is promoted and imposed (both openly and in an indirect, covert way) in different countries and in different contexts.

As far as the Russian language is concerned, in the times of the Soviet Union it embodied the objective of unifying national republics into a single Soviet community. Consequently, social bilingualism emerged in these regions. The authorities implemented the so called "Planned resettlement" as a means of decreasing the proportion of indigenous population (Matskiv 2017: 193). Hence, in Ukraine this intervention (very clearly rooted in Russian colonialism) affected people's attitudes towards their linguistic identity. As a result, many individuals who identify as Ukrainians may consider Russian as their native language and the primary language of daily communication (Matskiv 2017: 194). Examining these tragic chapters of contemporary Ukrainian history, it can be stated that the identity crisis which resulted in separatist tendencies among certain territorial factions (notably in the Donbas region) within society was inherently linked to language and information space (Matskiv 2017: 194).

Volodymyr Kulyk discusses the evolution of Ukrainian identity following its independence, highlighting the significance of both ethno-cultural and civic versions in shaping national identity. In the conditions of statelessness, this identity was predominantly centered around ethno-cultural elements rather than civic ones. However, Soviet governmental policies led to a gap between linguistic practice and ethno-cultural identity (Kulyk 2014: 156). Drawing upon the data of sociological research conducted in 2012, the scholar maintains that while Ukrainians hold the Ukrainian language in high esteem, its significance transcends mere communicative function because it is integral to their national identity. Yet, this linguistic identity and practice gap persists due to inconsistent language policies which fail to mandate widespread use of the language in question (Kulyk 2014). Therefore, despite being a dominant

factor for defining national identity, Ukrainian does not always feature as the primary mode of daily communication among Ukrainians.[3]

An international survey conducted by the Pew Research Center posed questions to respondents from various countries regarding the significance of language in shaping national identity. The majority of participants across all fourteen nations maintained that proficiency in their native tongue was a crucial factor for being considered as a true member of their respective communities. Approximately eighty percent or more citizens from the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Hungary, and Germany regarded linguistic ability to be pivotal for obtaining citizenship. Interestingly, Canadians and Italians displayed less correlation between language and national identity; however, still over sixty percent of those surveyed maintained this close association (Stokes 2017). Therefore, it can be inferred that language serves as a semiotic system that imparts discursive-national-cultural idiosyncrasies of consciousness, as noted by a Ukrainian scholar specializing in psychology and psycholinguistics (Zasiekina 2014: 124).

2.2. Language as a unifying social factor

Tetiana Matskiv (2017: 194-195) emphasizes that when examining the correlation between language and identity, it is imperative to consider not only Ukraine's linguistic and demographic landscape but also its official language policies in educational institutions, mass media platforms, regional features as well as other pertinent factors. Given the situation of the Ukrainian language, it is crucial to discuss the concept of linguistic security. Typically, this concept is defined in relation to national security, information security, language sovereignty and language policy. In the present article, we regard linguistic security as an essential component of the state's national security; however, it has yet to be legally codified in Ukraine.

Linguistic security refers to the legal safeguarding of the state language, which guarantees the formation of a democratic and lawful state. This protection ensures a safe preservation of its integrity, normativity, functionality, national and cultural originality, and capacity for self-development and improvement. Additionally, as noted by Olena Syt'ko (2020: 45–50), it involves implementing measures that promote and sustain linguistic development within the nation.

Investigation into the relationship between language and identity extends beyond a mere correlation with the ethnic and linguistic composition of

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[3] In a survey of the attitudes of Poland-based Ukrainian and Belarusian students to their languages (post-2022), Głaz (2025) reports a similar finding in connection with Belarusian students, some of whom treat Belarusian as their mother tongue although they do not speak it well.

a particular population. These issues have been extensively debated. Tetiana Matskiv (2017: 194) notes that speech, performing a communicative function, shapes a socio-informative space, which is the basis for learning, receiving and distributing information in society.

Moreover, given that language exerts as a cohesive influence that defines one's identity and allows one to distinguish between the self and others, people frequently view those who communicate in unfamiliar dialects as "other", resulting in predominantly negative interactions. Conversely, those who speak the same language are more likely to be perceived as similar and connected. This is an indispensable attribute of the social reference system, regarded as a facet of ethnic identity that encompasses notions of shared ancestry, history, religion and lifestyle among fellow members that belong to a specific ethnic group (Kulyk 2014: 202).

As pointed out above, language serves cultural, educational and informational purposes that together shape the linguistic consciousness of its speakers. In this light, language plays a significant role in providing mental and ideological guidance (Matskiv 2017: 198). Furthermore, similar to the domain of historical politics, language has become a tool of manipulation in the political sphere and often elicits negative reactions from the public. Nevertheless, linguistic ukrainocentrism is an essential component in understanding the essence of modern Ukrainian identity (Matskiv 2017: 198). Volodymyr Kulyk carries this idea further by claiming that the Ukrainian language plays a crucial role in shaping both ethnic-cultural and civic identity among its speakers, who still coexist with Russian-speaking individuals within the territory of the same Ukrainian state (Kulyk 2014: 156).

When considering language in relation to ethno-national factors, it is important to recognize the present state of linguistic awareness, which Ihor Ivanov (2008) refers to as the everyday level of national consciousness. This level encompasses a plethora of stereotypes, i.e., inadequate, deformed and distorted notions that are associated with idealized and mythologized concepts regarding the historical path of Ukrainians as an ethnic group.[4] The everyday consciousness reflects both well-established customs, attitudes, and priorities that have been ingrained through long intergenerational traditions, as well as dynamic needs, emotions, interests, and values. According to Ivanov (2008: 71), it serves as the foundation for establishing the traits of the

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[4] This understanding of stereotype is thus different from a more technical and objectified understanding in cognitive ethnolinguistics (see Bartmiński 2009, chapters 10–11; Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska 2013), where it need not be negative or "untrue". In cognitive ethnolinguistics, stereotypes are viewed as socio-cultural mental complexes that organize the thinking of a community.

national character, patterns of mentality, tendencies in national psychology, and a formation of historical memory as integral components of national consciousness. In other words, language plays a crucial role in what has been called the "social construction of reality" (Resta 1998).[5] This approach informs and underlies the significance of our study, whose goal is precisely to obtain access to the linguistic consciousness of native speakers of Ukrainian – we attempt to do this with the aid of the free associative experiment method. The method reveals what is salient to speakers, what a person is experiencing at a particular moment, and what occupies their thoughts.

Finally, as noted by Olena Holikova and Ksenia Taranenko 2022: 108) the concept of "native language" contains cognitively and communicatively relevant information that contributes to the formation of one's worldview, system of values, and generally cultural belonging. Language serves as a lens through which a particular linguistic community perceives and conceptualizes reality, not only at a given point in time but also in the historical dimension.[6] It conveys ideas about the world, entrenched in a unique system of meanings. Each natural language embodies a distinct way of encoding reality. The meanings inherent in language are organized into a system of views, an overarching philosophical framework that is collectively assimilated by all native speakers belonging to the linguistic community. According to Anatoliy Yakovlev, this collective philosophy serves as the foundation for shared perspectives on the world, common values, and so on (Yakovlev 2017: 172). In anthropological linguistics, cultural linguistic, and ethnolinguistics, inquiry into this kind of collective philisopny is known as linguistic worldview research, a vast field with many diverse (but also largely compatible) traditions and methodologies.[7] Within this broadly understood framework, our

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[5] In fact, the notion of the social construction of reality has been circulating in sociologically-oriented literature (more specifically, relating to the sociology of knowledge) for decades, at least since the publication of the seminal book by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) under that very title.

[6] We are certainly aware that what we only mention in passing here, i.e. the problem of the historical dimension in studies on language and culture, is a major issue in itself. For example, as one of possible solutions, it has been framed in terms of panchrony (see Łozowski 2022, 2023).

[7] Because of its richness, we only provide the basic references here, such as Bartmiński (2009, 2017) or Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska (2013) – representatives of the Lublin Ethnolinguistic School; Pajdzińska (2013), who has researched into literary texts within the linguistic worldview approach; Underhill (2009, 2011) – a proponent of a model inspired by Wilhelm von Humboldt's philosophy of language; or Hill and Mannheim (1992) – representatives of American linguistic anthropology. For a broader background and a synthetic outlook see Głaz (2022); for a popular-scientific treatment of that enterprise in the context of linguistic relativity see Deutscher (2011).

study aims to reveal relevant notions, associations, and values linked with the use of the Ukrainian language, i.e. a portion of the Ukrainian linguistic worldview that centres around the cultural concept of MOVA (language).

3. Materials and method

To pursue our research objective, we conducted an online survey involving a total of 211 participants. The survey was carried out in November 2022 and its administration was executed via digital means. Our questionnaire requested respondents to specify their age and gender but avoided any inquiries concerning location, as it could involve both internally displaced persons and those who have not relocated from their place of residence. The female participants comprised 69%, and the male participants – 31%. As for the age, 79% of the respondents were aged 18–34, 19% were aged 35-50 and 2% of the respondents were more than 50 years old.

The participants in the experiment were instructed to respond with the first word that comes to mind to the stimulus word *mova* 'language'. From this survey, we acquired a set of reactions that formed an associative field (80 different reactions with varying frequencies).[8]

4. Results and Discussion

The most repeated reactions to the stimulus word *mova* 'language' were as follows: *ukrains'ka* 'Ukrainian' – 62; *ridna* 'native' – 25; *solovyina* 'nightingale's' – 10. The core of the associative meaning is the reaction *ukrains'ka* 'Ukrainian' with the frequency of 62 times, which is 30% of all reactions in the associative field. According to Natalia Butenko (1979: 120), the core of the associative meaning comprises three frequently occurring reactions which form a condition for further experimentation with additional participants, provided that these reactions have the potential for increased repetition.

In the study, thematic clusters or semantic domains have been elicited within the associative realm of the stimulus word *mova*. It can be argued that the most numerous area in terms of the number of reactions is that in which the national component is present. An understanding of langu-age as a **nation-creating factor** that protects borders, creates the state

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[8] The associative experiment as a method has been used and discussed, among others, in Martinek (2004, 2024) or Polhorodnyk (2019).

and the national community is seen in the following reactions: *ukrains'ka* 'Ukrainian' – 62 mentions in the associative field; *svoboda* 'freedom' – 3 mentions; *nezalezhnist'* 'independence' – 2 mentions; *volya* 'liberty' – 1. The importance of language as a factor that shapes the nation is present in the following reactions: *natsiya* 'nation' – 5; *kod natsii* 'nation's code' – 2; *identyfikatsiya natsii* 'national identification' – 1; *narod* 'people' – 1; *derzhava* 'state' – 1; *ethnos* 'ethnos' – 1. Language is given such characteristics as *derzhavna* 'state' – 6 or *natsionalna* 'national' – 1. The reactions in which the meaning of language in terms of what distinguishes a nation were traced as follows: *identychnist'* 'identity' – 2; *symvol* 'symbol' – 2; *marker* 'marker' – 1; *samoidentyfikatsiya* 'self-identification' – 1; *kod* 'code' – 1; *dusha natsii* 'soul of the nation' – 1; *identyfikator* 'identifier' – 1; the power of language to unite: *yednist'* 'unity' – 3; the power of language to protect: *zbroya* 'weapon' – 5; *mova tse i ye Ukraina* 'in itself language is Ukraine' – 4; *kordon* 'border' – 2; *syla* 'power' – 2; *ukrayintsi* 'Ukrainians' – 1.

The stimulus word *mova* 'language' elicited reactions through iterative exposure within the associative field, which carry **values**, in particular: *vira* 'faith'; *zhyttya* 'life'; *povaha* 'respect'; *kokhannya* 'love'; *volya* 'liberty; *istyna* 'truth'.

There have been reactions or responses that emphasize the **function** of language, in particular: *spilkuvannya* 'interaction' – 6; *identyfikatsiya* 'identification' – 3; *komunikatsiya* 'communication' – 2; *komunikatsiya mizh lyud'my* 'communication between people' – 2; *yednaye* 'unites' – 2; *prynalezhnist'* 'belonging' – 1; *rozblokuvannya movnykh kordoniv za kordonom* 'unblocking language borders abroad' – 1.

Several reactions carry an **activity** component, in particular: *mova tse rozuminnya* 'language is understanding'; *rozmova* 'conversation' – 2; *kul'tura spilkuvannya* 'interaction culture' – 1; *spiv* 'singing' – 1; *vybir* 'choice' – 1; *dopomoha* 'assistance' – 1; but also *superechky* 'arguments' – 1.

Emotional reactions are as follows: *ridna* 'native' – 25; *solovyina* 'nightingale's' – 10; *krasyva* 'lovely' – 2; *chudova* 'wonderful' – 2; *mamyna* 'mom's' – 2; *mylozvuchna* 'euphonious' – 2; *harna* 'beautiful' – 2; *vazhlyva* 'important' – 2; *hordist'* 'pride' – 2; *yedyna* 'the only' – 2; *naivazhlyvisha* 'the most important' – 2; *vazhlyvist'* 'importance' – 1; *znachushchist'* 'significance' – 1; *vaha* 'weight' – 1. The pronouns in reactions add even more intimacy and sense of belonging: *nasha solovyona* 'our nightingale's'; *moya* 'my'; *mova tse ridne* 'language is native'; *tse u seredyni* 'it is inside (me)'. Neutral reactions also occurred: *chasto prosto formal'nist'* 'often just a formality'; *u vsikh svoya* 'everyone has their own'.

The linguistic expression of an ethnic group encapsulates their spiritual, intellectual, and cultural legacy that has endured throughout centuries. From this perspective, language is a valuable repository of distinct knowledge, serving as a means of self-expression and reflection of social qualities (Ivanov 2008: 67). In the associative field, there are reactions that also convey certain motifs of folklore, namely: *solovey* 'a nightingale'; *solovyi* 'nightingales'; *dzvinochky* 'bells'; *tsvit* 'blossom'; *lis* 'forest'; or *skarb* 'treasure'.

In Figure 1, we see the core of the language associative field, which consists of the three most frequent reactions. Natalia Butenko (1979: 120) regards the three most prevalent responses as fundamental to the associative field. Within the larger circle, there are peripheral reactions with lower frequency of mentions. As the number of respondents increases, so too does the frequency of repetition. Basically, the nucleus remains unchanged.
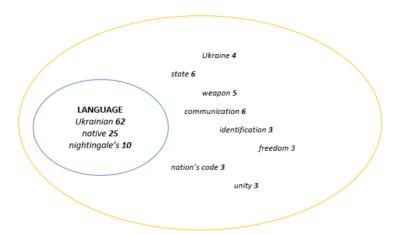

LANGUAGE
Ukrainian **62**
native **25**
nightingale's **10**

Ukraine **4**
state **6**
weapon **5**
communication **6**
identification **3**
freedom **3**
nation's code **3**
unity **3**

Figure 1. The structure of the associative field of the stimulus word *mova* 'language'

For the experiments of this type, it is imperative to underscore the significance of contextual supplementation with respect to the time when and place where an expression is used. This is due to the fact that said expression may have different connotations when used in different circumstances or contexts (Hasibuan 2016: 264).

With all those aspects, it becomes clear that the social context carries an associative meaning and is further shaped by events taking place in reality. It reflects the actual meaning of the word, as well as the impact of the media that mold people's attitudes towards particular ideas, often charged with emotive undertones. In our associative field, the social and political context elicits the following reactions: *zbroya* 'weapons' – 5; *yednist'*

'unity' – 3; *identyfikatsiya* 'identification' – 3; *svoboda* 'freedom' – 3; *kordon* 'border' – 3; *syla* 'power' – 2; *yednaye* 'unites' – 2; *dopomoha* 'assistance' – 1; *rozblokuvannya movnykh kordoniv za kordonom* 'unblocking language borders abroad' – 1. In our survey, there often occurred other variants of the word 'identification': *identyfikator* 'identifier'; *identyfikatsiya natsii* 'national identification'; *samoidentyfikatsiya* 'self-identification'.

The language factor is an important element of understanding the peculiarities of modern Ukrainian national identity, as it performs the function of mental and ideological guidelines. The language factor often becomes an element of manipulation in the political space, so it often triggers a negative public response. Despite this, linguistic ukrainocentrism is important for the Ukrainian society, which is a necessary component for understanding the essence of modern Ukrainian national identity (Matskiv 2017: 198).

According to Joshua Fishman, language planning is an expression of social goals, ideologies and aspirations of societies and cultures, and its "nature and direction ... is reflected and directed by the environment of status planning – social tendencies, ideologies and relationships" (2009: 14). As Iulia Makarets notes, status language planning is close to the modern understanding of language policy (2019: 95).

The official status of the Ukrainian language is a crucial element in unifying Ukrainian society, fostering a sense of national identity among citizens, and safeguarding the sovereignty and security of the state. The ratification of Ukrainian as the official language is a constituent element within the framework of state institutionalization, the formation of a state-management mechanism for ensuring language policy (Maiboroda 2008: 170).

5. Conclusion

The research reveals that a full-scale war on Ukraine compels citizens to reassess the significance of the Ukrainian language as an integral facet of Ukrainian nationality and sovereignty. A considerable number of Ukrainians are adopting the practice of using the Ukrainian language for their everyday communication.

For centuries, the Russian language was forcibly imposed upon Ukrainians, leading to a destruction of their identity and instilling the feeling of inferiority. These factors have greatly impacted the language consciousness of Ukrainians. In light of Russia's ongoing aggressive actions against Ukraine, there is now a heightened awareness among Ukrainians regarding the crucial role that language plays as a state-forming factor.

It should be noted that our research shows an upward trend in language awareness among the respondents, with Ukrainian being the preferred choice. This is reflected by the frequent repetition of the reaction *Ukrains'ka* 'Ukrainian' to the stimulus word *mova* 'language' 62 times out of 211 responses. By associating themselves and their state with this language, Ukrainians are safeguarding their identity. The reactions to the stimulus word form an associative field that can be grouped into several semantic categories based on national, emotional, folkloristic, ethnic and activity-related components. Furthermore, our findings reveal various functions of language within this domain, namely: communication, interaction, identification, belonging, unity, or unblocking of linguistic borders.

We consider language an essential nation-building factor that not only shapes national identity, but also safeguards it. Therefore, we see the significant relevance of further research into language-related matters and policy implementation within Ukraine, given that language can both ignite and mitigate conflicts. From the perspective of our psycholinguistic research, we see positive progress in the linguistic consciousness of Ukrainians in the direction of choosing their preferred means of communication.

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Streszczenie: Autorki prezentują psycholingwistyczną analizę świadomości językowej Ukraińców w wyniku badania reakcji na leksykalny bodziec *mowa* 'język'. Podstawę analiz stanowią wyniki eksperymentu asocjacyjnego, przeprowadzonego wśród Ukraińców pod koniec 2022 roku. Ukazują one treść asocjacyjną związaną z koncepcją języka. Powstałe pole asocjacyjne obejmuje reakcje, które można podzielić na kilka grup semantycznych, obejmujących aspekty narodowe, etniczne, emocjonalne, folklorystyczne i związane z aktywnością człowieka, a także sferę ujawniającą różnorodne funkcje językowe. Badanie miało na celu ujawnienie roli tożsamości językowej i świadomości językowej w kontekście wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: bodziec leksykalny; znaczenie asocjacyjne; eksperyment asocjacyjny; identyfikacja językowa; polityka językowa; świadomość językowa