

Disparate Language Cultures – Russia’s language policies in temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories in historical perspective

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Abstract

This article examines Russian language policies in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine in light of historical precedents. It shows how current policies of Russification echo imperial practices from the nineteenth century, identifying recurring ideological tropes in Russian discourse depicting Ukrainian as a dialect, an artificial construct, or a dangerous political project. These narratives are shown to be part of a broader imperial tradition that claims authority to define linguistic reality and uses language as a tool of political control. In contrast, the article reconstructs a Ukrainian perspective through debates in the journal *Osnova* (1861–1862), highlighting a pragmatic and inclusive approach to language development, grounded in usage, variation, and communicative function. These dynamics can be productively understood within a broader framework of differing language cultures, with Russian traditions tending toward prescriptive and hierarchical models, and Ukrainian language culture toward performative, pluralistic, and practice-oriented forms.

1. Preamble

In September 1861, Vasyl Bilozerskyj, editor of the Ukrainian journal *Osnova* – the main venue for debates about the Ukrainian language during the two years of its existence – published an editorial laying out the journal’s programme for the upcoming year 1862. He writes:

Вопросъ – *быть или не быть* нашей словесности? еще недавно составлялъ предметъ спора для многихъ; но его разрѣшила утвердительно сама жизнь, неподдающаяся никакой предвзятой теоріи. Никто теперь не скажетъ, что украинской словесности *нѣтъ*, какъ, бывало, говорили и писали прежде. (Bilozerskyj [Belozerskij] 1861: 2–3; italics in the original)¹

The question whether our written culture *should or should not exist* has until recently been a topic of debate for many; but life itself has resolved it in the affirmative, defying any preconceived theory. [...] No one can say now that a Ukrainian written culture *does not exist*, as they used to say and write before.²

Two years later, on 27 June 1863, interior minister in the Russian empire, Petr Valuev, received a letter from Orest Novyc'kyj, head of the Kyiv Censorship Committee, urging him to “[...] принять какие-либо меры против обнаруживающагося стремления некоторых малороссов, а совместно с ними и поляков, отчуждать здешний народ от общерусских языка и народности.” (Novyc'kyj [1863] 2015: 73) (“take measures against the apparent aspirations of some Little Russians, and together with them Poles, to alienate the local people from the common Russian language and nationality”). Novyc'kyj states that:

[большинство малороссиян] [...] весьма основательно доказывают, что никакого особенного малороссийского языка не было, нет и быть не может, и что наречие их, употребляемое простонародьем, есть тот же русский язык, только испорченный влиянием на него Польши, [...] (Novyc'kyj [1861] 2015:72)

[most Little Russians] [...] argue quite convincingly that a distinct Little Russian language did not, does not, and cannot exist, and that their dialect as spoken by the simple folk is the same as the Russian Language, only corrupted by the influence from Poland, [...]

Three weeks later, these famous phrases went into the Valuev circular of 1863,³ banning the use of Ukrainian in a range of genres, in particular, those most relevant for basic general education. This was a hard blow for ongoing Ukrainian efforts to educate peasants and their children, an endeavour reflected by at least six Ukrainian-language primers published between 1857 and 1861 (see Figure 1).⁴

¹ The orthographic conventions applied in the various cited editions have been retained. This inter alia means that in some instances, pre-revolutionary spelling has been modernized, while in others it remains unchanged. All translations are my own.

² The passage echoes similar phrases from the 1861 programme, published in the very first volume of *Osnova*, but seems to have gained a little in confidence: “Въ наше время, число болѣе или менѣе даровитыхъ южно-русскихъ писателей увеличивается съ каждымъ годомъ; въ наше время, вопросъ – можно ли и слѣдуетъ ли писать по-южно-русски, или, что все равно, – по-украински, разрѣшенъ самимъ дѣломъ.” (Osnova 1, 1861, 2). (“These days, the number of more or less talented Southern Russian writers is growing every year; these days, the question of whether it is possible and appropriate to write in Southern Russian, or, what amounts to the same thing, in Ukrainian, is resolved by the matter itself.”). “Southern Russian” and “Little Russian” are common nineteenth-century imperial terms for Ukrainian.

³ For broader historical context on the Valuev circular, see, among others, Saunders 1993, Remy 2017, Šandra 2015, Moser 2017, with references.

⁴ Among the authors of Ukrainian-language primers were leading Ukrainian writers such as Taras Ševčenko and Pantelejmon Kuliš.

2. Introduction

This article takes as its starting point the language policies implemented by Russian occupation authorities in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.⁵ Drawing on statements published in official and semi-official sources, I examine what these texts reveal about Russian conceptions of the Ukrainian language and how their ideas echo patterns rooted in the imperial tradition. However, I also have a broader, more ambitious goal: to propose a framework for thinking about differences in the *language cultures* of Ukrainian and Russian. Here, my aim is to broaden the perspective when discussing in what ways, and to which degree, Ukrainian is different from Russian, or vice versa. It is a question that comes up in many contexts, linguistic, political and cultural.

Let me unpack this a little. The question “How different are Ukrainian and Russian?” is usually answered by referring to a particular percentage of common vocabulary (62%), which is in turn compared to percentages of common vocabulary between, say, Ukrainian and Polish (70%), or Ukrainian and Belarusian (84%).⁶

If we look beyond vocabulary and delve deeper into the question, we find numerous structural similarities between Ukrainian and Russian, but also significant differences. The latter include distinctions in noun and verb morphology, the presence of a synthetic future form in Ukrainian, significant variations in the quantity and use of particles, and many others. We can also point to differences in the alphabets, (historical) phonetics and pronunciation, and, not least, in the historical and political contexts that shaped the emergence and development of their respective standard languages.

This last category brings us to the topic of *language culture* or the slightly narrower notion of *linguistic culture*, which Harold Schiffman defines as:

[...] a set of behaviors, assumptions, cultural forms, prejudices, folk belief systems, attitudes, stereotypes, ways of thinking about language, and religio-historical circumstances associated with a particular language. (Schiffman 1996: 5)

Language culture is a broad concept encompassing everything that occurs on the margins and in the contexts of a language’s existence and life in a society. It has to do with language policies, linguistic ideologies or ideas about language, language attitudes, linguistic usage and linguistic reflexivity: debates about language.

In this article, my claim is that language culture represents a domain – perhaps the domain – where Ukrainian and Russian diverge most profoundly. I will be concerned with *ideas about language* and my primary focus will be on Russian conceptions of Ukrainian, as reflected in the discourse accompanying language policies implemented in the occupied regions of Ukraine, and in selected historical parallels, most of them

⁵ As of April 2026, Russia occupies approximately 20% of Ukraine: Crimea in its entirety; parts of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

⁶ Figures according to *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/ukr/>.

dating from the early 1860s. In the final section, I will complement this discussion with brief insights into Ukrainian conceptions of their own language, with particular attention to the years preceding the Valuev circular.⁷

3. Language policies in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine

Our main sources on developments in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine include reports from human rights organizations, regular occupation updates from the Institute for the Study of War, and ongoing reporting on language policy from the State Language Protection Commissioner of Ukraine (e.g. Hird 2024; Human Rights Watch 2024; Luhansk Regional Human Rights Center “Alternative” 2025; Upovnovaženyj; see also Bækken 2025; McGlynn 2026; Pidkujmucha 2026).

Language policies in the occupied territories have followed somewhat different trajectories in Crimea, the so-called DNR (Donetsk People’s Republic) and LNR (Luhansk People’s Republic) and, since 2022, in the occupied parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions. Overall, however, Russia’s approach to language policy in occupied Ukraine can be broadly summarized as follows:

1. Russia has implemented extensive “re-education” measures that amount to indoctrination and incorporate elements of militarization. These policies are most visible in school subjects such as history, literature, language, and culture, where curricula are redesigned to align with Russian narratives. Children from the occupied territories are sent to “re-education” camps, many of which include military training.⁸ Teachers are either subjected to ideological retraining or replaced with personnel brought in from Russia, while Ukrainian textbooks are removed and replaced with Russian ones or new materials prepared specifically for the occupied regions. Beyond the classroom, Ukrainian-language books are systematically destroyed, and large-scale imports of Russian-language publications reinforce the ongoing process of cultural and linguistic assimilation.
2. In this process, Ukrainian is gradually downgraded from a language of instruction to a mere subject. Ukrainian lessons eventually become optional, upholding a façade of choice, before being abolished altogether – typically justified by claims of “lack of interest” among parents and, as of autumn 2025, by reference to “the changed geopolitical situation in the world.” (Jačmennikova 2025).

⁷ With reference to imperial times, what I here call “Russian” and “Ukrainian” conceptions largely reflect ideas shaped by representatives of intellectual and cultural elites. In the discourse accompanying Russian language policies the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, the picture is somewhat more mixed.

⁸ Many of these camps are heavily militarized and some equal military training facilities, see, e.g., the recent documentary produced by the War Crimes investigation Unit of The Kyiv Independent (2025).

3. The official discourse that accompanies the linguistic policies reflects what Michael Moser (2023: 36–37) has dubbed a “double-bind” strategy: On the one hand, a stated appreciation of Ukrainian, often accompanied by some kind of legal structure, and, on the other, countless references to the artificiality, uselessness, etc of Ukrainian. This contradictory rhetoric serves to delegitimize Ukrainian while maintaining a veneer of compliance with linguistic rights.

Here, I will focus on the third point.⁹

4. Russian conceptions of Ukrainian – occupation policies and historical parallels

Official Russian discourse about the Ukrainian language draws on a set of recurring ideological clichés. Within this framework, Russian is frequently presented as the historically legitimate language of the region, reinforcing claims of cultural and political unity. At the same time, Ukrainian is portrayed as lacking authenticity and dismissed as an artificial construct unworthy of serious consideration. Such rhetoric often frames Ukrainian as a potential threat, while depicting its marginalization as both rational and historically inevitable. Breaking down these ideas reveals the following key components, which I will examine in more detail below:

- Ukrainian as a part of Russian(ness)
- Ukrainian as a dialect
- Ukrainian does not exist
- Ukrainian as artificial
- Ukrainian as linked to a range of bad/dangerous things (Nazism, Russophobia)
- Ukrainian as “beautiful”, “charming” (but not to be taken seriously)

4.1. Ukrainian as a part of Russian(ness); Ukrainian as a dialect; Ukrainian does not exist

These three conceptions are widespread and often appear together. The first two points are illustrated in the following statements by Russian Member of Parliament Evgenij Fedorov, both made in September 2022:

[...] украинский язык является неотъемлемой частью российской культуры. (Fedorov 2022)

⁹ I have not conducted digital fieldwork myself for this article. Most of the post-2022 examples I discuss are drawn from Michael Moser’s survey on language policies in the occupied regions, covering the years 2014–2022 (Moser 2023). Moser has since updated his findings in two articles following the developments up until 2025 (Moser 2025; Moser 2026).

Очень просто, это исторический, красивый, классический украинский диалект русского языка. Тот, который был в советский период, и ранее, в период существования Российской Империи. (Nesterova 2022)¹⁰

[...] the Ukrainian language is an indispensable part of Russian¹¹ culture.

It is very simple: this is an historical, beautiful, classical Ukrainian dialect of the Russian language. The one that existed in the Soviet period, and earlier, during the existence of the Russian Empire.

The perception of Ukrainian as non-existent arises by implication out of statements about Ukrainian being a part of Russian, being a dialect, which we have seen already, or being artificial, as we will see in the following.

As is well known, this idea is part of Russia's imperial mindset that also determines the nature of the ongoing war, the idea that Ukraine or Ukrainian statehood does not exist, with the implication that neither does Ukrainian language, history or culture.

For the conceptions of Ukrainian as a dialect of Russian, "the same as Russian", or as not existing, the most famous historical parallel is, of course, the wording of the Valuev circular. Similar ideas appear in numerous other texts, not least in the months and weeks preceding the Valuev circular.

In a forceful attack on the Ukrainian movement, Russian journalist and editor Mixail Katkov published several articles where he attacked the Ukrainophile movement, seeing its origins in a Polish conspiracy. In his editorial in *Moskovskie vedomosti* 21 June 1863, he rejects the idea of a distinct Ukrainian language by rhetorically exclaiming: "Как будто возможны две русские народности и два русских языка [...]" (Katkov [1863] 2015: 68) ("As if two Russian peoples and two Russian languages could be at all possible!"), and extends the rejection to the existence of a Ukrainian history and a Ukrainian state:¹²

¹⁰ This is Fedorov's response to a question concerning the concept of a "classical Ukrainian language," a notion that was, for a time, promoted by Russian officials with regard to the occupied territories. For a discussion of this concept, see Moser 2023; 2025, 2026.

¹¹ Fedorov here uses the adjective *rossijskij* (relating to the Russian state) rather than *russskij* ('Russian' in the ethnocultural or linguistic sense), thus claiming that the Ukrainian language somehow belongs to (the cultural sphere of) the Russian state.

¹² As Ukrainian historian Mykola Kostomarov responded to Katkov's attacks, the exchange developed into a fierce debate, where Kostomarov's last contribution was an article meticulously outlining, from a linguistic point of view, the differences between Ukrainian and Russian. He starts out with a quote from the distinguished Slavist Franc Miklošič (Franz Miklosich) who in his comparative Grammar of the Slavic Languages wrote: "Indem ich die sprachen nach der nähe ihrer verwandtschaft an einander reihe, behandle ich dann das kleinrussische, das auf dem gebiete der wissenschaft, wie die untersuchung selbst darthut, als eine selbständige sprache und nicht als ein dialect des grossrussischen anzusehen ist." (Miklosich 1852: IX; spelling of the original). Then, Kostomarov goes on to list, in considerable detail, differences covering phonetics, orthoepics, (historical) phonology, morphology, word formation, syntax, stress patterns and vocabulary (Kostomarov 1863). On the Katkov–Kostomarov debate, see Saunders (1993) and Moser (2017).

Украина никогда не имела особой истории, никогда не была особым государством, украинский народ есть чистый русский народ, коренной русский народ, существенная часть русского народа, без которой он не может оставаться тем, что он есть. (Katkov [1863] 2015: 69)

Ukraine has never had a separate history, has never been a separate state, the Ukrainian people is the pure Russian people, the indigenous Russian people, an essential part of the Russian people, without which it cannot possibly be what it is.

4.2. Ukrainian as artificial

The argument about Ukrainian as “artificial” is often combined with the idea of Ukrainian as created by somebody else, more often than not, an enemy. Journalist Vasilij Stojakin cites the following statement by Elena Panina, Director of the Institute of International Political and Economic Strategies in Moscow:

После многолетних издевательств на Украине закрепился не украинский язык, а его «канадський діалект». Он вышел из-под пера бандеровцев в Канаде, где западноукраинский диалект «гармонично» дополнился искажёнными англо-, полоно-, германо- и другими «измами». Лишь бы не русскими. (Stojakin 2022)

After years of mockery, not the Ukrainian language but its “Canadian dialect” has taken root in Ukraine. It originated from the pens of Banderites in Canada, where the Western Ukrainian dialect was “harmoniously” supplemented with distorted Anglicisms, Polonisms, Germanisms, and other “isms”. Just not Russian ones.

A similar mix of clichés is found in a statement by Sergej Markov, political analyst, former MP and former member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe:

Есть классический украинский язык – условно говоря, язык Тараса Шевченко, который очень близок к русскому языку и который любой русский человек понимает, поскольку является, по большому счету, вариантом русского языка.

А есть – современный официальный украинский язык, который является продуктом политтехнологов. Максимально насильственно дерусифицирован, русские слова заменены специально огромным количеством польских и английских слов. И этим искусственным украинским современным, можно сказать, тоталитарным, террористическим языком, пытаются сейчас учить разговаривать школьников официальные украинские власти.

Нам нужно ликвидировать этот искусственный язык, созданный террористическими методами, язык современных бандеровцев, политтехнологический антирусский язык. (Markov 2022) [Cf also 4.3]

There is classical Ukrainian – roughly speaking, the language of Taras Ševčenko, which is very close to Russian and which any Russian person understands, since it is, by and large, a variant of Russian.

And then there is the modern official Ukrainian language, which is the product of political technologists. It has been forcibly derussified to a maximum degree, with Russian words deliberately replaced by a huge number of Polish and English words. And it is this artificial modern Ukrainian language, which could be described as totalitarian and terrorist, that the official Ukrainian authorities are now trying to teach school children to speak.

We need to eliminate this artificial language, created by terrorist methods, the language of modern Banderites, a political anti-Russian language. [Cf also 4.3]

Once again, history offers numerous parallels. The Russian occupation of Galicja in 1914, marked by harsh Russification policies, bears notable similarities to today's occupation of Ukraine. Street signs were replaced by Cyrillic lettering (unfamiliar to local speakers of German, Polish, Romanian and Yiddish), schools were russified, the import of Ukrainian-language books from imperial Russia was banned, while teachers of Russian were brought in from imperial Russia.

In a 1914 memorandum, Russian member of parliament Dmitrij Čixačov referred to [...] “существование глубоко враждебной России школы с преподаванием на польском, немецком и на искусственно созданном украинском жаргоне” (quoted from Baxturina 2000: 91) (“the existence of a school, deeply hostile towards Russia, teaching in Polish, German and an artificially created Ukrainian jargon”; while governor General Georgij Bobrinskij stated that “Теперь, когда Червонная Русь стала частью российской державы, искусственные успехи «украинской мовы» и фонетики должны рухнуть” (quoted from Baxturina 2000: 92) (“now that Red Rus has become part of the Russian Empire [...] the artificial success of the ‘Ukrainian language’ and phonetics must be destroyed”).

If we go further back in time, returning to the articles of Mixail Katkov, he derides the efforts of activists who seek to promote Ukrainian-language instruction in village and Sunday schools, dismissing Ukrainian as an “artificially constructed language”:

Явились новые Кириллы и Мефодии с удивительнейшими азбуками, и на Божий свет был пущен пуф какого-то небывалого малороссийского языка. По украинским селам начали появляться, в бараньих шапках, усердные распространители малороссийской грамотности и заводить малороссийские школы, в противность усилиям местного духовенства, которое вместе с крестьянами не знало, как отбиться от этих непрошенных «просветителей». Пошли появляться книжки на новосочиненном малороссийском языке. (Katkov [1863] 2015:68)

There appeared new Cyrils and Methodiuses with the most amazing alphabets, and a puff of some unprecedented Little Russian language was released into the light of day. Diligent disseminators of Little Russian literacy began to appear in Ukrainian villages, wearing sheepskin hats, and to establish Little Russian schools, contrary to the efforts of the local clergy, who, together with the peasants, did not know how to fend off these uninvited “enlighteners”. Books began to appear in the newly invented Little Russian language.

4.3. Ukrainian as linked to a range of bad things (Nazism, Russophobia)

In today's Russian conceptions of Ukrainian, reference is often made to Nazism, terrorism or Russophobia. In August 2022, Russian film maker and propagandist Nikita Mixalkov said that the Ukrainian language had lately become an “[образ] русофобии” (“image of Russophobia”), while “Словосочетания, которые мы слышим в украинской транскрипции или произношении – они для нас, для мира и для них самих являются формулированием ненависти к России.” (Mixalkov 2022) (“Word combinations that we hear in Ukrainian transcription or pronunciation are, for us, for the world, and for themselves, an expression of hatred towards Russia.”) His colleague

in the literary field, writer, propagandist and veteran of the Russo-Ukrainian war Zaxar Prilepin,¹³ stated in June 2022 that Ukrainian would be taught in the newly occupied territories

[к]ак часть огромной славянской и общероссийской культуры. А не как польскую русофобскую побрякушку. (Prilepin 2022)

[a]s part of the vast Slavic and All-Russian¹⁴ culture. And not as some Polish Russophobic trinket.

Such labels mirror broader propaganda discourse about Ukraine where, in particular, the Nazi label is routinely invoked. If we look for historical parallels beyond the post-WW2 era, a recurring view from the mid-nineteenth century onwards is to view Ukrainian as dangerous, subversive and closely associated with political activism. This can be seen already in count Aleksej Orlov's investigation report to the tsar 26 May 1847, accusing Taras Ševčenko of composing poems “на малороссийском языке, самого возмутительного содержания” (Kuryljuk 1982, 130) (“in the Little Russian language of the most outrageous content”). He writes: “Сверх того, что все запрещенное увлекает молодость и людей с слабым характером, Шевченко приобрел между друзьями своими славу знаменитого малороссийского писателя, а потому стихи его вдвойне вредны и опасны [...]” (Kuryliuk 1982, 130) (“On top of the fact that everything forbidden attracts young people and those with weak characters, Ševčenko gained fame among his friends as a famous Little Russian writer, and therefore his poems are doubly harmful and dangerous [...]"). Similar views became increasingly common over the next decades.

4.4. Ukrainian as “beautiful”, “charming” (but not to be taken seriously)

This conception can be illustrated by a quote from a director of religious affairs of the Military-Civilian Administration of (the occupied parts of) Zaporizhzhia region:

Есть песни на малороссийском наречии, есть определенная культура деревенская – это понятно, красиво, и ничего плохого в этом нет. (Ткач 2022)

There are songs in the Little Russian dialect, there is a certain village culture – this is understandable, beautiful, and there is nothing bad about it.

Such stereotypes reflect a general stance of the nineteenth century (and, in a slightly modified version, of Soviet times), that of a tolerance for Ukrainian (folk) culture within the confines set by Russian intellectuals and authorities: Ukrainian is good for folk songs

¹³ According to Russian news reports, Prilepin joined the Russian army in Ukraine again in October 2025.

¹⁴ Just like Fedorov (see above), Prilepin here uses the adjective *rossijskij* (relating to the Russian state) rather than *rususkij* ('Russian' in the ethnocultural or linguistic sense).

and comedy, but not for serious themes (cf. Koznarsky 2017). In a (favourable) review of the second edition of Ševčenko's *Kobzar'*, Nikolaj Dobroljubov revisits the debate earlier sparked by radical critic Vissarion Belinskij and others: “возможна ли малороссийская литература” (“whether Little Russian literature is possible”), stating that “стихотворения Шевченка именно тем и отличаются, что в них искусственного ничего нет” (“Ševčenko's poems are distinguished precisely by the fact that there is nothing artificial [i.e. relating to ‘art’] about them”), before elaborating:

Конечно, по-малороссийски не выйдет хорошо «Онегин» или «Герой нашего времени», так же, как не выйдут статьи г. Безобразова об аристократии или моральные статьи г-жи Тур о французском обществе. (Dobroljubov 1860: 99)¹⁵

Of course, [*Evgenij*] *Onegin* or *A Hero of Our Time* would not work well in Little Russian, just as Mr Bezobrazov's articles on the aristocracy or Mrs Tur's moral articles on French society would not work.

In the words of Russian writer Il'ja Ėrenburg, “Украинский язык вырос и жил в деревне; пересаженный в кабинет философа или на улицу современного города, он поблек и зачах.” (Ėrenburg [1919] 1997:333) (“The Ukrainian language grew and lived in the village; transplanted into a philosopher's study or onto the streets of a modern city, it faded and withered away.”) In a classical three-stage model of nation building, the Russian conception of Ukrainian seems to have stopped at the first stage, focusing on expressions of folk culture.

What do these statements, and the historical parallels, reveal about prevailing Russian conceptions of the Ukrainian language? They point to a persistent desire on the Russian side to claim the authority to define what Ukrainian is (or is not); to a firm belief in the efficacy of linguistic policies, and to a tendency to frame language issues within broader questions of politics and identity. Today, as well as historically, such conceptions of the Ukrainian language are clearly instrumentalized in the articulation and justification of language policies. At the same time, the statements expose Russia's profound misunderstanding of the linguistic situation in Ukraine.

5. 1905 – A fresh view?

To gain insight into the historical persistence of such views, while also adding nuance to the picture, I will briefly examine a 1905 memorandum prepared by the Imperial Academy of Sciences at the request of the Minister of Education. It was prompted by a proposal to lift the restrictions on Ukrainian imposed by the Ems decree (1876) including its amendments in 1881.¹⁶ Based on the recommendations of an expert group headed by Fedor Korš and including leading Russian linguists such as Aleksandr

¹⁵ The reference is to V. Bezobrazov's articles and E. Tour's “Paris Letters” published in 1858 in *Russkij vestnik*.

¹⁶ The Ems decree further restricted the use of Ukrainian in print, prohibited the import of Ukrainian books from abroad, and banned the staging of plays in Ukrainian. The decree was slightly modified in 1881.

Šaxmatov and Filipp Fortunatov, the memorandum advocated lifting the ban and concluded that,

[...] малорусское население должно имѣть такое же право, какъ и великорусское, говорить публично и печатать на родномъ своемъ языкѣ. (Imperatorskaja Akademija Nauk'' 1905:III)

[...] the Little Russian population should have the same right as the Great Russian population to speak publicly and publish in their native language.

The memorandum questions the legitimacy of the nineteenth-century bans, describing them as “сцѣпленіе несчастныхъ случайностей” (“a combination of unfortunate coincidences”) that led to the prohibition of the Ukrainian language. It argues that censorship should have targeted content alone, rather than “[...] внѣшняя оболочка мысли, способъ выраженія ея, слова, буквы [...]” (Imperatorskaja Akademija Nauk'' 1905: II) (“the external membrane of thought, the means of its expression, the words, the letters”) – that is, language.¹⁷

The Memorandum incorporates an extensive report by the expert group. The report adopts a broadly positive view on the linguistic rights of Ukrainian.¹⁸ It provides a comprehensive survey of Ukrainian-language writing, effectively presenting a kind of “history of Ukrainian literature”, and even asserts that “въ дѣлѣ демократизма малорусская литература лѣтъ на 50 обогнала великорусскую”. (Imperatorskaja Akademija Nauk'' 1905: 4) (“in terms of democratism, Little Russian literature outpaced Great Russian literature by fifty years.”)

The Russian linguists should be commended for speaking out in favour of Ukrainian, a stance that is, unfortunately, far less commonly observed among Russian linguists today regarding the Russification of the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories. Fedor Korš, in particular, was a steadfast supporter of the Ukrainian movement and later criticized Russian liberal Petr Struve, who justified his strong opposition to Ukrainian-language schools by, again, invoking the nineteenth-century notion of a single “All-Russian” language (Struve 1912).¹⁹ By referring to the linguistic situation in the

¹⁷ This point echoes the views of Minister of Education Aleksandr Golovnin, one of the few imperial officials who opposed the Valuev circular in 1863, above all on formal grounds: he supported censorship, but books should be banned “за мысли, в них изложенные, а не за язык, на котором писаны, [...]” (Golovnin [1863] 2015: 81) (“for the ideas expressed in them, *not for the language* in which they are written, [...]).

¹⁸ Mykola Hruševs'kyj ([1916] 2015: 555) later noted with satisfaction that the report “трактує як рівнозначні одиниці наріди ‘великорусскій’ і ‘малорусскій’, ‘языкъ малорусскій’ і ‘языкъ великорусскій’” (“treats as equal entities the terms ‘Great Russian’ and ‘Little Russian’ peoples, ‘Little Russian language’ and ‘Great Russian language’”).

¹⁹ For the sake of balance: both Russian liberals and nationalists strongly opposed the idea of a separate Ukrainian language. A telling example of the latter is Sergej Ščegolev, member of the Kyivan Club of Russian Nationalists and a seasoned bureaucrat in the Kyiv censorship office. In a book denouncing the Ukrainian movement he states: “Всякій книжный малорусскій (украинскій, если хотите) языкъ будетъ, въ зависимости отъ культурнаго словеснаго багажа автора, неизбѣжнымъ коверканіємъ либо польскаго, либо русскаго языка. Выражаясь вульгарно, такое „кованіє“ новыхъ словъ при помощи малорусской фонетики и морфологіи является бездарнѣйшимъ лингвистическимъ плагіатомъ, весьма близкимъ къ семинарской шуточной латыни. Литературный малорусскій языкъ въ прозѣ Кулиша, Старицкаго и въ стихахъ Костомарова, Конисскаго и

Austrian-Hungarian part of Ukraine, Korš effectively demonstrated that the question of a separate Ukrainian standard language was a political question:²⁰

Въ томъ-то и бѣда безусловныхъ проповѣдниковъ московско-петербургскаго «общерусскаго» языка, что подъ бокомъ у российской Украины, за едва замѣтной чертой австрійскаго рубежа, украинскій языкъ пользуется совершенною самостоятельностью, служить орудіемъ не какой-нибудь бытовой, а полной литературы, употребляется для преподаванія всякихъ наукъ не только въ низшихъ, а и въ среднихъ и даже высшихъ училищахъ и все болѣе проникаетъ въ офиціальныи обиходъ. (Korš 1912:46)

The problem with the unconditional advocates of the Moscow-St. Petersburg “All-Russian” language is that, right next to Russian Ukraine, just across the barely noticeable Austrian border, the Ukrainian language enjoys complete independence, serves as a tool not only for everyday life, but also for a whole body of literature, is used for teaching all kinds of subjects not only in lower, but also in middle and even higher educational institutions, and is increasingly penetrating official usage.

Let us return to the Academy of Science memorandum. Despite the linguists’ generally positive stance, the Academy’s summary reveals clear traces of the imperial chauvinism that we have seen in many examples. When criticizing the bans for hindering general education in Ukraine, the Academy does not refer to the efforts of Kuliš and others to educate the peasantry in Ukrainian during the 1850s and 1860s. Instead, it argues that the bans

[Въ настоящее время] [...] нарушаютъ интересы сельскаго населенія Малороссіи: распространеніе книгъ духовно-нравственнаго, воспитательнаго, общеобразовательнаго содержанія задерживается отчасти полнымъ незнакомствомъ, отчасти недостаточнымъ знакомствомъ малорусовъ съ великорусскимъ книжнымъ языкомъ. Все это весьма невыгодно отражается на интересахъ всего русскаго народа. (Imperatorskaja Akademiia Nauk” 1905:II)

[...] violate the interests of the rural population of Little Russia [today]: the dissemination of books of spiritual, moral, educational, and general educational content is hindered partly by complete unfamiliarity and partly by insufficient familiarity of Little Russians with the Great Russian literary language. All this has a very negative impact on the interests of the entire Russian people.

другихъ [...] былъ пародіей русскаго языка.” (Ščegolev 1912: 225–26); (“Any literary Little Russian (Ukrainian, if you will) language will, depending on the author’s cultural and verbal baggage, inevitably be a distortion of either the Polish or the Russian language. To put it bluntly, such ‘coining’ of new words with the help of Little Russian phonetics and morphology is the most talentless linguistic plagiarism, very close to seminarian mock Latin. The literary Little Russian language in the prose of Kuliš, Staryckyj, and in the poems of Kostomarov, Konys’kyj, and others [...] was a parody of the Russian language.”) On the debates surrounding the Ukrainian language question between 1905 and 1916, see Danylenko (2017).

²⁰ Korš anticipates the famous formula attributed to Ukrainian writer and politician Volodymyr Vynnyčenko, “Російська демократія закінчується там, де починається українське питання” (“Russian democracy ends where the Ukrainian question begins”): “[...] многіе изъ нашихъ либераловъ, готовые всегда заступиться за права любой не-русской народности въ Россійскомъ государствѣ, словно не могутъ признать такія же права за народностью украинской, малорусской.” (Korš 1912:47) (“[...] many of our liberals, who are always ready to defend the rights of any non-Russian nationality in the Russian state, seem unable to recognise the same rights for the Ukrainian, Little Russian nationality.”)

6. A Ukrainian perspective

To counter the predominant Russian perspective, I would like to bring in some examples of the Ukrainian view on Ukrainian, going back to the *Osnova* journal.²¹

In the penultimate volume of the journal, teacher at a Sunday school Oleksandr Stojanov published an article entitled “Untruthfulness and indifference are the major obstacles to the spread of literacy”. He responded to accusations against the Ukrainian movement concerning the language of instruction in schools. Stojanov reported that he had actually attempted to teach the children in Russian, but concluded that he “долженъ былъ навсегда отказаться отъ подобнаго нелѣпаго педагогическаго опыта” (“had to abandon this ill-advised pedagogical experiment for good”), maintaining that at least initial teaching must be taught “*на понятномъ, родномъ для него, языкѣ*” (Stojanov 1862: 77, italics in the original) (“*in a language that is understandable and familiar [to the pupil]*”). Interestingly, he added:

Никто не отвергаетъ великорусскаго языка (это было бы такъ же нелѣпо, какъ и *исключительно* навязывать его), такъ точно, какъ не отвергаетъ всякаго другаго языка, какъ средства для знанія и развитія. (Stojanov 1862:77, italics in the original)

No one rejects the Great Russian language (that would be as absurd as imposing it *exclusively*), just as no one rejects any other language as a means of knowledge and development.

Similar views transpire elsewhere in the *Osnova* debates. A case in point is Ukrainian writer Oleksandr Konys’kyj, who states in the first issue of the journal:

Українська мова годиться не для однієї віршів; на їй и теперъ можна говорити й писати *про все наше*, такъ-таки, якъ и на іншихъ. Такъ собі думаючи, пишу до васъ перші вісті по-нашому; може, на мій листъ обізвуться зъ другихъ сторони розумніши люде и придатніше напишуть. Оттакъ, по-троху, по-троху, та й дійдемо до того, що про все писатимемо по-українськи. [...] (Perexodovec [Konys’kyj] 1861:319; italics in the original)

The Ukrainian language is not only appropriate for verses; one can speak and talk in *it about all our affairs*, as in any other language. With this in mind, I am sending you the first news in our language; maybe, wiser people will react to my letter from other regions and write more appropriately. This is how we will increasingly reach the point when we will write about everything in Ukrainian. [...]

This pragmatic vision of a gradual, collaborative move toward a Ukrainian standard language recurs in various forms throughout the two-year run of *Osnova*. In conclusion, I will present just three examples.

In the journal’s first issue, Pantelejmon Kuliš announced his ongoing work on a Ukrainian dictionary. He marveled at the steady influx of “new words” appearing in

²¹ In discussing the Ukrainian take on Ukrainian, I limit myself to the historical perspective and a few examples from *Osnova*, where the immediate context is the relationship between Ukrainian and Russian and the role and status of Ukrainian as a literary/standard language. There is, of course, much more to be said on the meta-discourse on Ukrainian as it develops into a modern standard and later state language of Ukraine.

print and in the spoken vernacular, and hesitated to publish a dictionary of a language still in flux. At the same time, he urged others engaged in similar efforts to share their word collections with him (Kuliš 1861a: 333–334).

In the April 1861 issue, the editors published the first chapter of Kuliš's *History of Ukraine*. Again, we learn that the author was hesitant to publish a work in progress that was not complete “ни въ литературномъ, ни въ ученомъ отношеніи” (“neither in literary nor in scholarly terms”), but the editors wanted to show “въ какой степени языкъ украинскій способенъ къ строгому научному изложенію столь-важнаго предмета, какъ исторія” (Kuliš 1861b:79) (“the extent to which the Ukrainian language is capable of a rigorous scientific exposition of such an important subject as history”).

Finally, in the same issue, the editors report a constant flow of incoming texts from all corners of Ukraine, and beyond. They signal a generous linguistic policy, provided that the authors write in the manner “spoken by the people” about this or that particular matter:

Наша Українська мова, якъ и самі, здорові, знаєте, має въ собі велику вагу и силу; все, що перейшло черезъ серце и розумъ незлічимої семі, котра зъ давніхъ-давенъ жила и живе на нашій Україні широкій, – все одзначалось въ нашій рідній мові [...] Ми, боронь Боже, не думаємо проводити дорогу гостю тісними дверима, якъ и зпершу въ «Основі» сказано; нехай коженъ добрий чоловікъ пише якъ уподобавъ и змалку наслухався; тільки треба пильної уваги – чи такъ же якъ-разъ веде народъ річъ въ тімъ случаі, який хочемо повістити. (Od'' redakciji 1861: 31–32)

Our Ukrainian language, as you, healthy people, know well, carries in it great weight and power; everything that has passed through the hearts and minds of countless families who have lived and continue to live in our vast Ukraine since time immemorial has been recorded in our native language. [...] We do not intend, God forbid, to lead our guests through narrow doors, as was initially stated in *Osnova*; let every good man write as he pleases and as he has heard since childhood; only careful attention is needed – whether the people are speaking this way in the case we want to report.

This is a very pragmatic, slightly pluralistic and also emphatically non-hierarchical conception of a Ukrainian standard language in the making. It took over from a more “precarious ambiguity”, to use a phrase by Taras Koznarsky (2017:15), in negotiating Ukrainian language and identity in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Even before the nineteenth century, we see a sustained “performative” display of Ukrainian; traceable at least to Ivan Kotljarevskyj, whose *Aeneid* is “dressed” in Ukrainian (as the title page has it), *showing* that a Ukrainian literary language grounded in the vernacular did indeed exist. Throughout the nineteenth century, amid debates over the status of Ukrainian, intellectuals and writers reinforced its legitimacy – and advanced its development – by simply using it, often with notable linguistic variation. In doing so, they proved Vasyl Bilozerskyj right: “life itself resolved [the question of Ukrainian] in the affirmative” (Bilozerskyj [Belozerskij] 1861: 2–3).

7. Concluding remarks

The material examined in this article suggests that the differences between Ukrainian and Russian extend far beyond questions of linguistic structure and into the realm of what may be termed *language cultures*. The analysis covers only one of several dimensions of the language cultures of Ukrainian and Russian, but the results nevertheless allow us to draw some preliminary conclusions. On the Russian side, we observe a persistent tendency to subsume, redefine, or delegitimize Ukrainian, grounded in an imperial tradition that treats language as an instrument of political control and cultural hierarchy. This tradition manifests itself both historically and in current policies as a belief in the efficacy of top-down linguistic intervention and in the authority to define the linguistic reality of others. (Several of these characteristics are also mirrored in the language policy of The Russian Federation within Russia itself, a topic that, however, exceeds the limits of this article. Suffice it to mention one telling example: the recently published prescriptive and strongly ideologized dictionary of “the Russian state language” (Čentemirov 2025).)

By contrast, Ukrainian language culture emerges as fundamentally performative, pluralistic, and practice-oriented, grounded in use rather than prescription and in inclusion rather than exclusion. Of course, there is nuance to add to this picture. For sure, there are examples of purists and purism in Ukraine as in any other linguistic community. As the debates in *Osnova* illustrate, however, Ukrainian intellectuals tended to approach language not as an object to be regulated, but as a shared cultural practice to be developed gradually through use, negotiation, and cooperation.²² Their readiness to accept variation, their emphasis on intelligibility and communicative function, and their insistence on the legitimacy of Ukrainian across all domains – from elementary education to scientific discourse – reflect a non-hierarchical understanding of language that stands in sharp contrast to imperial models.

²² While these remarks are based on the historical perspective on Ukrainian discussed in this article, more recent developments in Ukrainian language culture reveal similar dynamics and reinforce the same overall pattern.



Figure 1: A selection of Ukrainian primers 1857–61. Authors: Il’ja Derkač, Taras Ševčenko, Mykola Hatcuk, Pantelejmon Kuliš, Kalenyk Šejkovskij, Leonid Jaščenko

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