

VALUING LANGUAGE IN THE UKRAINIAN-ROMANIAN BORDERLANDS

Kathryn Cassidy
University of Birmingham, UK

Rezumat: Acest articol analizează modul în care activitățile economice informale, care au ajuns să domine multe comunități rurale de la granița ucraineano-română din 1989/1991, favorizează cunoașterea limbii române. Materialul este rezultatul a cincisprezece luni de cercetare etnografică în două comunități rurale, situate de ambele părți ale graniței de Est-ucraineano-română, în apropierea orașului Siret, în condițiile în care comercializarea și achiziționarea de bunuri de peste graniță – complementară migrației forței de muncă în Sudul și Vestul Europei – constituie o componentă importantă a economiei rurale locale.

Abstract: This article examines how informal economic activities, which have come to dominate many rural communities in the Ukrainian-Romanian borderlands since 1989/1991, are favouring a knowledge of Romanian rather than the Ukrainian language. It is based on fifteen months of ethnographic research in two rural communities on either side of the Eastern Ukrainian-Romanian border near the Romanian town of Siret,¹ where the trading and purchase of goods across the border, in addition to migration for work to Southern and Western Europe, form a major part of the local rural economy.

Résumé: L'article ci-joint analyse la manière dans laquelle les activités de l'économie informelle, qui sont arrivées à dominer plusieurs des communautés rurales de la frontière ukrainienne – roumaine de 1989/1991, favorisent la connaissance de la langue roumaine. Le matériel est le résultat de quinze mois de recherche ethnographique de deux communautés rurales, situées des deux parties de la frontière ukrainienne – roumaine des alentours de la ville Siret, dans les conditions où la commercialisation et l'acquisition de biens d'au-delà de la frontière – complémentaire à la migration de la force de travail dans le Sud et l'Ouest de l'Europe – constitue une composante importante de l'économie rurale locale.

Keywords: Informal economy, language, ethnography, borders, rural populations, migration.

¹ Siret is in Suceava County, Romania and is the main road border crossing between Ukraine and Romania in Eastern Romania. This crossing is located approximately 40km to the south of the city of Chernivtsi in Ukraine and 40km to the north of the city of Suceava in Romania. Much of the rest of the Ukrainian-Romanian border is located in the Carpathian Mountains, so this crossing is very busy both in terms of local and international road traffic. This is one of the primary routes by which the many Turkish goods sold in Ukraine arrive in the country.

Introduction

This is a region that has seen considerable political change since the beginning of the 20th century. As part of this political change, the communities of Diyalivtsi and Gorbănița² have also experienced shifts in the official state languages and the language of the state education system. These numerous changes are perceptible in the vocabulary and grammatical structures of the local dialects of Ukrainian and Romanian. The most recent shift in language policy came after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with Article 10 of the 1996 Constitution declaring Ukrainian to be the only state language³ north of the border (Pavlenko 2006: 86). Romanian has been the official language to the south of the border since 1918; however the current border, which was finalised in 1944, does not reflect a distinct linguistic border. The majority of the population of Diyalivtsi was Ukrainian-speaking, but both of the larger neighbouring villages were Romanian-speaking. Gorbănița was home to heritage speakers of Ruthenian,⁴ which was also spoken in the majority of neighbouring settlements, however was slowly being replaced amongst the younger generations by Romanian. The article is divided into three sections: the first gives a brief introduction to language shift in the region, highlighting perceptions of state languages and language education; the second section explores the use of language in cross-border trading and shopping; the third analyses perceptions of language used in migration.

Language Shift in the Ukrainian-Romanian Borderlands

One of the key linguistic legacies of the Soviet era in this region, as in many others, was the widespread use of Russian as a lingua franca.⁵ The large Romanian minority to the north of the border was one of the reasons that the Russian language came to dominate more so in this region than in other areas of Western Ukraine.

As a result of this imbalance, Russian speakers could afford to be monolingual, speakers of titular languages aspiring to social advancement had to be bilingual, and minority language speakers had to be either bilingual (with Russian or the titular language as a second language) or multilingual. (Pavlenko, 2008b: 282)

Many Romanian speakers in Chernivtsi region became only bilingual and not multilingual in the Soviet period, i.e. did not learn Ukrainian, due to the fact that it had up until this point never been used officially in the region, in either education or

² These are the pseudonyms I have given to the two communities in which I carried out my fieldwork, Diyalivtsi in the Chernivtsi region of Ukraine and Gorbănița in Suceava County, Romania.

³ Russian and Ukrainian are the official languages in the Autonomous Province of Crimea.

⁴ I use the term Ruthenian here as the villagers always referred to themselves as speaking ‘porus’kyy’. However, it is important to note that this language is very similar to the dialect spoken north of the border, where people would refer to it as ‘village’ or simply Ukrainian. It does differ in a number of ways from modern, standardised Ukrainian.

⁵ For more on this topic see Bilaniuk 2003, 2005 and Pavlenko 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2009.

administration. Some have remained resistant to learning Ukrainian since 1991, as Dima,⁶ a Romanian-speaker from Diyalivtsi's neighbouring village explains:

First I had to learn Russian and now they want me to learn Ukrainian. Well I won't. I am too old to learn another language.

In autumn 2007, I was talking to Vasyl' a middle-aged civil servant in Chernivtsi, who was ethnically Romanian and had been brought up bilingually, speaking Romanian at home and learning Russian through his education and later in his workplace. Vasyl' told me that in 1991 he had been given three months to learn Ukrainian and had done so to a suitable level to satisfy his superiors. However, on a day to day basis, all of Vasyl's colleagues still spoke to him in Russian. Almost all of his non-written professional communication was in Russian and being fairly senior, his Ukrainian-speaking colleagues simply accommodated him. Unlike Vasyl', Dima had not had the resources to learn Ukrainian after 1991. He could not return to school and there were no other means for him to officially gain some knowledge of the language. Instead, he relied upon the passive knowledge he had developed of the language over the years and continued to communicate himself in Russian outside of his Romanian-speaking environs. This practice is commonly referred to as 'non-reciprocal bilingualism' or 'mutual passive bilingualism' (see for example Bilaniuk, 2005). A distinction is made between this type of bilingualism in which each interlocutor understands but is unable to converse in the language of the other and 'non-accommodating bilingualism' (Bilaniuk, 2006: 3), in which each interlocutor chooses to respond in another language, in spite of having an active knowledge of that of his interlocutor.

In spite of having the right to minority-language education, it seemed that both Romanian speakers in Ukraine and Ruthenian speakers in Romania had started to favour education in the state language. Maria was a teacher from a Ukrainian-language school in a Diyalivtsi's neighbouring Romanian-speaking village: *Every year we have more and more pupils, as more parents decide to send their children here instead of the Romanian school. They think it is better to be educated in Ukrainian now.*

The concerns of parents were confirmed by Irina, a lecturer from the university in Chernivtsi. As she herself was from a Ukrainian-speaking village in a more remote part of the region, she had little patience with the pleas of her Romanian-speaking students: *These people cannot write an essay in Ukrainian. I spend most of my time crossing out Russian words. Sometimes, when they are really bad, I return their essays and tell them to resubmit them in Ukrainian!*

In Romania, standardised Ukrainian had also begun to challenge the local Ruthenian dialect. A number of initiatives exist to assist fellow Ukrainian-speakers across the border in Romania. These include the production and dispatch of Ukrainian language materials to local schools,⁷ the availability of places at the sixth form and university in Chernivtsi and cross-cultural projects through the universities, museums

⁶ All names have been changed.

⁷ These include the publishing house, 'Bukrek' <http://bukrek.net/>.

and other organisations in the region. Standardised Ukrainian is used in these texts and students who left their villages to study in Ukraine returned speaking a distinctly different language from that maintained in their homes and local communities. A conversation with Doina, an English language teacher from a school in a village near Gorbănița, highlighted the perceived value of the Ukrainian language in these communities: *The children used to speak in Ukrainian amongst themselves, because they knew I didn't understand. They would use Ukrainian words for things sometimes, but that doesn't happen so much anymore. A few years ago, the parents voted to have all classes at the school in Romanian, so that their children would not be disadvantaged linguistically.*

She confirms the lessening use of Ukrainian, in spite of efforts from across the border and also explains that this was an active choice by parents; a choice concerning the future prospects for their children. This gave a greater sense that the language was used only in the village; one to be confined at home and of little use outside of this limited geographical space. It also highlighted, that many Ruthenian-speakers in the area did not see value in maintaining the language in the future.

A lack of competence to communicate adequately is here not seen as a problem of the speaker, but as a problem for the speaker, lodged not in individual forms of deficit or inability but in the connection between individual communicative potential and requirements produced by the environment. (Blommaert et al, 2005: 198)

Therefore, the environment created by the official language of the state both in Romania and Ukraine was perceived to be a problem for the speakers of minority languages, which local people were trying to address through educating their children in the state language. However, such decisions represented choices for the future and did not reflect the current, everyday life in both Diyalivtsi and Gorbănița, in which few households were sustained solely by formal employment.

Most householders were dependent to some extent upon income from remittances from overseas migrants, cross-border trading or the access to cheaper goods across the border. As examples, in Diyalivtsi the village doctor's wife had been working in Italy illegally for seven years, sending money home for her two teenage daughters to go to medical school and university. Lyuba was a younger woman who had not left for Italy and remained in Diyalivtsi; however she supplemented her husband's salary from the Ukrainian National Guard with the money she made in trading cigarettes across the border to Romania. In Gorbănița, the majority of households with people of working age had at least one member currently employed overseas. The local blacksmith was in receipt of goods through contacts from Ukraine, which he sold in the surrounding villages, as was the local shopkeeper. Other families, who had the means to do so, often travelled to Ukraine themselves to buy goods. It was these activities that were dictating the immediate language needs of the population and I shall now discuss how they favour knowledge of the Romanian language.

The Informal Economy of the Border

Romanian has come to be seen as more useful in Ukraine in recent years in cross-border trading activities and in gaining employment in the many services aimed at Romanian shoppers. Both of these factors were highlighted in the economic activities of the people in Diyalivtsi. In contrast, due to the high number of Romanian speakers in the shops and at the market in Chernivtsi, Ruthenian speakers from Romania rarely enjoyed any benefits to their shopping due to their language skills. Whilst the villagers of Diyalivtsi regularly discussed their abilities in Romanian and viewed such knowledge as valuable, no-one in Gorbănița alluded to any advantages to being able to speak Ruthenian in terms of cross-border trade.

Trading Across the Border

In December 2007, I crossed the border to Romania with two Ukrainian speakers from Diyalivtsi. The young couple made such trips on a daily basis to trade cigarettes in the Romanian border town of Siret. As neither of them spoke Romanian, their activities depended on a network of Romanian speakers from Ukraine and Ukrainian/Ruthenian speakers from Romania. Their language skills did not enable them to deal directly with Romanian speakers in Romania and their profits were affected by the 'commission' charged by their bilingual intermediaries. When living in Gorbănița, I observed how bilingual traders from Ukraine were able to come and sell products and goods directly at local markets and with local businesses. The knowledge of both languages proved to be a means of gaining income both through direct trading activities and also through acting as an intermediary to other traders.

Trade between individuals is facilitated when all traders share a common culture and language. A common culture allows individuals to trade with one another without intermediaries. In the case of language, this is most clear. If two agents speak the same language, they can negotiate a contract without the use of a translator. A common culture allows the traders to have common expectations and customs, which enhances trust. (Lazear, 1999: S97). Lazear highlights that being able to trade in the same language enhances trust. He also goes on to discuss the cost implications of the use of a translator or intermediary.

In reality, trade can occur between individuals with different cultures or languages. In the case of language, a translator can be used. In the case of culture, mistrust and misunderstandings can be avoided by hiring individuals who are bicultural to act as liaisons. But such activity is costly, and it is best to think of the value of a trade as the net gain associated with being able to conduct the trade without engaging the services of an intermediary. (Lazear, 1999: S98)

It was a desire to improve their gains in trading across the border that made the acquisition of Romanian language important to the people of Diyalivtsi. It was notable that of those traders from Chernivtsi, who were most actively engaged in these activities, many were ethnic Romanians. Most were able to trade with contacts in Suceava and operated a dual role of providing transportation for people wishing to

travel between to the two urban centres, as well as engaging in some trading as well.⁸ Many travelled across the border in their own minibuses/vans, whilst those in Diyalivtsi used cars and mopeds or were dependent on hitching a ride with someone crossing on the main road. The Romanian language and being able to speak it well, was a clear advantage in negotiations with buyers of goods in Romania. However, as Lazear concludes, those who benefit most are the bilingual. Ukrainian speakers to the south of the border, who engaged in the cigarette trade, money changing, etc. with the villagers of Diyalivtsi did benefit from their knowledge of Ukrainian. Nonetheless, as the sellers of the goods, the onus was upon those from Ukraine to meet the needs of their market by speaking Romanian.

Serving the Shoppers

The removal of the Ukrainian visa regime for Romanian citizens has led many to travel across the border to buy Ukraine's cheaper goods⁹ for their own personal use or to sell on in Romania. This has led to a rise in the number of businesses on the Ukrainian side of the border crossing with Romania to meet their needs. To avoid having to travel all the way to Chernivtsi, many Romanians prefer to use the petrol stations and shops that have sprung up near the border. These businesses charge a premium compared to their counterparts in Chernivtsi or in nearby villages and they also provide much-needed employment in rural communities. The benefits are not always evenly felt though, as Romanian-speakers are in greater demand to deal with the wave of Romanian clients. Maria, a young woman from the neighbouring Romanian-speaking village to Diyalivtsi came to me very excited one day about an offer of employment: *The owner of that new shop on the main road by the border has offered me a job. He approached me directly and really wants me to work there; to speak to the clients.*

Maria was approached due to her knowledge of Romanian, which was not shared by most people in Diyalivtsi.

Whilst many of the people of Diyalivtsi were keen to learn some Romanian to help in this trade, few from Gorbănița spoke of a need for Ukrainian in their shopping trips to Ukraine. I travelled one day with a young couple from Gorbănița to Kalynyvs'kyi market in Chernivtsi. The young man was from Gorbănița, but had worked for a number of years in France and had no working knowledge of Ukrainian. His wife was from a nearby Romanian-speaking village. When we arrived at the market, I initially accompanied them and was translating between them and the stallholders, but it soon became apparent that such translation was not necessary as

⁸ The profitability of their trade is highlighted by the homes these people were currently building. Around Chernivtsi, many large new homes are being built; some of these belong to cross-border traders and are built from the profits of this trade.

⁹ As a general guideline, at the time of research, certain household goods and produce were between half of the price and ten times cheaper in Ukraine. Petrol was approximately half the price it was in Romania and cigarettes and alcohol could be as little as a tenth of the price. Since that time, subsequent research shows that increases in prices following the economic crisis in Ukraine has made such trips less appealing, but they remain popular, particularly prior to important celebrations, such as Easter and Christmas.

most stallholders knew enough Romanian to deal with the young couple. Knowledge of Romanian proved to be useful not only to those selling across the border in Romania, but also in gaining jobs and customers in Ukraine itself. By contrast, there seemed to be few benefits related to the speaking of Ukrainian for the brief shopping trips made by Romanian citizens to the north of the border. Nonetheless, there were Ukrainian speakers in Romania profiting from acting as intermediaries to monolingual Ukrainian traders from across the border. The next section examines how Romanian was also useful indirectly in the languages of international migration.

International Migration

During the 1990s and into the 2000s, Russian remained important as a language of migration in Ukraine, with many men from the region continuing to go to work in construction in Russia, where salaries were higher. Although earnings were lower than those in countries in the EU, the risks and costs associated with this type of migration were lower. Russian, therefore, remained a valuable language to those in Diyalivtsi. Work in official positions and the formal sector, in which Ukrainian was necessary, continued to be beyond the reach of most people in Diyalivtsi. However, Russian was also beginning to lose its economic value as migration to Southern Europe grew and by the time of my fieldwork in 2007-2008, no migrant workers from the village remained in Russia. The most popular destinations for workers from Diyalivtsi were Italy and Spain,¹⁰ with the majority of workers being female, but including also some younger men, who had left together with their wives.¹¹ In Gorbănița, Italy and France had become the main sites of migration, with some people from the village now moving from France or Italy to the UK in particular, to gain higher salaries.¹² In contrast to Diyalivtsi, most of the migrants were men or young families.¹³

Romanian as a Useful Language

The Romanian language had come to be valued not only for cross-border trading, but also in migration. Natalya, a middle-aged woman from Diyalivtsi, walked with me through the village one day and we got talking about migration to Italy.

It really helps to know Romanian, you know? People who speak Romanian find it so much easier to learn Italian.

Her comment is one voiced commonly in the village and is confirmed by a conversation I have with Anatoliy, a migrant worker in Italy, who returned to Diyalivtsi in the winter of 2007/2008 to visit his family: *You know, it took us all these seven years to even start to get comfortable in Italian. The first two or three years*

¹⁰ The popularity of Italy as a destination was confirmed in a poll carried out by the Centre for Peace, Conversion and Foreign Policy of Ukraine (CPCFPU) in 2005, where 60% cited Italy as an attractive option, 32% Portugal and 25% Spain, with just 8% choosing Russia (Dikiy, 2007).

¹¹ For more on migration from Ukraine in the 1990s and 2000s, see Kotsunenکو, 2007.

¹² Since Romanian accession to the European Union on 1st January 2007.

¹³ For more on migration from Romania and Ukraine to Italy see Castagnone et al. 2007.

were really hard; we didn't understand anything. It's easier now, but I wish I had known some Romanian.

Knowledge of Romanian had had little status in the Soviet era, with Russian as a lingua franca and a lack of opportunities to travel outside of the Soviet Union, there was no economic reason for the people of Diyalivtsi to actively learn or maintain any knowledge they had. However, the growth in informal cross-border trading to Romania, new employment opportunities in services to Romanian shoppers crossing the border and migrant labour to southern Europe have all led to a growing awareness in Diyalivtsi that Romanian has actual economic value. Although the non-possession of Romanian language skills does not act as a complete barrier to these activities, it is widely perceived that such skills could assist villagers in their participation in them.

Hidden Ukrainian

In contrast to the usefulness of Romanian, the Ukrainian language was to a certain extent 'hidden' in international migration. There were two main reasons for this: firstly, that for heritage speakers from Gorbănița, they integrated into the Romanian migrant community and a knowledge of the language of the country of migration and Romanian were the only visible ones; secondly, due to the fact that immigration by the people of Diyalivtsi was often illegal or began illegally, they were also often forced to hide their native tongue. Raluca was a native of Gorbănița and had grown up speaking Ruthenian at home. She had married a Romanian speaker from a neighbouring village and she and her husband, along with their small child, were living and working in London. Raluca shared her home in London with another Romanian family from Transylvania. One day, when visiting Raluca, I spoke to her and her brother in Ukrainian, something we had done in the past. The two women from the other family in the house expressed shock and surprise in hearing Raluca speak another language. She had lived with them for two years and in that time had made no reference to being from a Ruthenian-speaking family. Given her own husband's inability to speak the language, she had simply never felt the need to make reference to it or use it. Raluca then had to explain to the two women that she was from a 'Russian-speaking' village.¹⁴

Irina, a woman from Diyalivtsi who had spent three years living and working in London, explained how she hid her Ukrainian knowledge and instead came to use Russian:

We had some good friends from the Baltics, Russian speakers, you know? They were very good friends, really they were and we understood one another well. I have tried to contact them since we got back, but I couldn't. They were good people, Lena and her husband. We spoke Russian to them, you know? They were illegal, like us at the beginning, but then they could use their own passports after a year or so, you know? They became members of the European Union.

Unlike in Italy, where there were large numbers of Ukrainian migrants, Irina and her husband were more isolated and found themselves making contacts on the

¹⁴ This is a mistranslation into Romanian of 'po-rus'kyy', in which most villagers from Gorbănița referred to themselves as speaking 'limba rusă', i.e. Russian.

basis of Russian, rather than Ukrainian. In addition, they had begun their stay in the UK with Greek passports, but later, like Lena and her husband, held passports from one of the Baltic States. This meant that Russian proved useful not only in terms of meeting other people, but also became their 'official' language with their false passports, as they posed as Russian speakers from the Baltics. Romanian, in contrast, did not become hidden in migration in the same way as Ukrainian and was considered to be useful by the people of Diyalivtsi in learning the Latin languages that were dominant in migration from the village.

Conclusions

In this article I have discussed just some of the factors influencing the use of Ukrainian and Romanian in rural communities near the border. Language in this region and its usage are complex issues; however, I have focussed on language in informal economic activities because of their dominance in the region. The languages necessary for these activities often fall outside of formal education policy. Romanian and languages such as Italian and Spanish were generally acquired informally, i.e. self-taught in Diyalivtsi. This reflected the fact that education and formal language training in both Ukraine and Romania are focussed on the formal employment sector. Several authors have suggested that in many post-Soviet countries English and Russian represent languages of opportunity (Bulajeva & Hogan-Brun, 2008; Nagzibekova, 2008). Yet, my research in Diyalivtsi showed that these two languages proved less important than Romanian, Italian, Spanish and even Portuguese. In Gorbănița and in surrounding Ruthenian-speaking villages, the continuance of the village's native language was being threatened by not only the state language, Romanian, but also languages of migration, such as French, English and Italian.

The Romanian language was clearly perceived to have advantages for the people of Diyalivtsi in economic terms. In migration, whilst they may hide or 'under-communicate' their Ukrainian language skills, a knowledge of Romanian was indirectly useful in learning Italian and Spanish, the main languages of migration for the villagers. However, in cross-border trading, the uses of Romanian were more directly felt, as it enabled trading without intermediaries and increased the geographical scope of their trade and therefore potentially could earn them greater profits. Villagers in Diyalivtsi's neighbouring Romanian-speaking villagers were finding themselves in demand in the local shops and services near the border, therefore also profiting from the Romanian language in cross-border economic activities.

Bibliography

- Bilaniuk, L. 2003 'Gender, language attitudes, and language status in Ukraine' *Language in Society* 32: 47-78.
- Bilaniuk, L. 2005 *Contested tongues: Language politics and cultural correction in Ukraine*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bilaniuk, L. 2006 'Language in the balance: The politics of non-accommodation in bilingual Ukrainian-Russian television shows' paper presented at the *Second Annual Danyliw*

Research Seminar in Contemporary Ukrainian Studies University of Ottawa, Canada, October 2006.

Blommaert, J., J. Collins & S. Slembrouck 2005 'Spaces of Multilingualism' *Language and Communication* 25: 197-216.

Bulajeva, T. & G. Hogan-Brun 2008 'Language and education orientations in Lithuania: A cross-Baltic perspective post-EU accession' *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 11(3&4): 396-422.

Castagnone, E., M. Eve, E.R. Petrillo & F. Piperno 2007 'MADRI MIGRANTI: Le migrazioni di cura dalla Romania e dall'Ucraina in Italia: percorsi e impatto sui paesi di origine' *Working Papers* 34/2007 from the Programma MigraCtion of the Forum Internazionale ed Europeo di Ricerche sull'Immigrazione and Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale, Rome: Italy. Available online at <http://www.cespi.it/WP/WP34%20Madri%20migranti.pdf> accessed on 06/04/2010 at 15:47.

Dikiy, E. 'Zhizn' na dva mira' *Ekspert* 10(61). Available online at <http://expert.ua/articles/18/0/1700/> accessed on 06/04/2010 at 16:22.

Kostenko, L. 2004 'Ukraina kak zhertva i factor globalizatsii katastrof' in L. Ivshina (ed.) *Dvye Rusi: Ukraina Incognita*: 471-483.

Kotusenko, V. 2007 'Labour Migration from Ukraine and its Ethical Implications' in *Oikonomia: rivista di etica e scienze sociali* 3: 9-13.

Kuzio, T. 1998 *Ukraine: State and Nation Building*. London: Routledge.

Lazear, E. 1999 'Culture and Language' *Journal of Political Economy* 107 (6, 2): S95-126.

Nagzibekova, M. 2008 'Language and education policies in Tajikistan' *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 11(3&4): 501-508.

Pavlenko, A. 2006 'Russian as a Lingua Franca' *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 26: 78-99.

Pavlenko, A. 2008a 'Russian in post-Soviet countries' *Russian Linguistics* 32: 59-80.

Pavlenko, A. 2008b 'Multilingualism in Post-Soviet Countries: Language Revival, Language Removal, and Sociolinguistic Theory' *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 11(3): 275-314.

Taranenko, O. 2007 'Ukrainian and Russian in contact: Attraction and estrangement' *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 183: 119-140.