

# BETWEEN UKISH AND OBLIVION: THE UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE IN CANADA TODAY

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Although my special competence lies in literature, I have been a language teacher for all my teaching life and have been observing what is happening to the Ukrainian language in Canada. My topic, therefore is twofold:

1) language as a function of ethnic identity and 2) the Canadian variant of the Ukrainian language.

## IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE:

“Speech is civilization itself,” wrote Thomas Mann in the *Magic Mountain* but it is also a **marker** for the speaker’s a) level of **education**; b) **social** status; **regional** background; d) **group** identity.

Regarding education: a person who speaks a language poorly reveals that he has little education. People who say “I ain’t been there” and people who say “vony bachut’ vs’o” - show that they do not know the proper way of speaking the language and therefore are poorly educated, have little or no education in the given language.

The same can be said for social status. Often the vocabulary used by native speakers inadvertently reveals social status, or origin of language source. A person who considers it normal to say *pysok* vs. *lytse* for face reveals his “lower” social status. In the same way people who say *ja ljúblju* vs. *ja ljubljú*; *sklep* vs. *kramnytsja*; *pyvnytsja* vs. *pidval*; *pidzemka* vs. *metro*, *taksivka* vs. *taksi*, etc. show themselves to be speakers of the Western as opposed to Eastern Ukrainian dialect, while those who say *hochu* vs. *khochu*; *rowbyty* vs. *robyty*; *pejlo* vs. *vidro*, *gara* vs. *avto* identify themselves as North American speakers of the language.

Finally, all speakers of a given language, no matter what the dialect, are given a group (national) identity. When there is no real state, this group identity by means of language spoken becomes extremely important - as it was for Ukrainians throughout modern

history. Ukrainians, in fact, have been a bit obsessed with language. Although, ironically, few know the language well, all consider themselves experts on it. Get two together and they will immediately give expert opinion as to what is and what is not proper Ukrainian. Usually what is, is that which they know, and what is not, is that which they do not use. Yet, as all who study language know, language, as a living entity, is in constant flux and change. Only extreme purists are proscriptive in language development. A known fact of all great languages (usually languages of empires) is that they are usually extremely open to change and development.

Yet for a stateless Ukrainian nation everything was judged by whether one could speak Ukrainian. One's very identity, one's patriotism, one's love for Ukraine - all centered around the ability to use the Ukrainian language. Most Ukrainians have been raised on the following sentiments by Panteleimon Kulish:

Народе без пуття, без чести і поваги,  
 Без правди у завітах предків диких,  
 Ти, що постав з безумної одваги  
 Грких п'яниць та розбишак великих.  
 Єдиний скарб у тебе - рідна мова,  
 Заклятий для сусідського хижацтва:  
 Вона твого життя міцна основа,  
 Певніша над усі скарби й багатства.

or the following by Sydir Vorobkevych:

Мово рідна, слово рідне,  
 Хто вас забуває,  
 Той у грудях не серденько  
 Тільки камінь має.

Poetry was supported by scholarship and an intellectual justification not only for the importance of the language but also of its unique and special status:

“Language,” wrote Ohiienko, “is our national attribute, in the language is our culture, the level of our consciousness. Language is the form of our life, of our cultural and national life, it is the form of national organization. Language is the soul of every nationality, its relics, its most valuable treasure... Of course, not the language as language, but language as a given cultural organ, an organ of tradition. In language are both our old and new culture, the attribute of our national acknowledgment.

Language is not just a simple symbol for understanding, because language is created in a given cultural sphere, in a given tradition. In such a case language is the highest form of our psyche, the foremost guardian of the psychic I.

And as long as the language lives, so will the people live as a nationality. Once the language disappears - there will be no nationality: it will completely disintegrate among a stronger people..."<sup>1</sup>

Little wonder then, that for Ukrainians language has become the barometer of statehood. Once statehood has been achieved, as it was in 1991, language has become the litmus test for the "Ukrainianness" of Ukraine.

Yet, as we all know, it is but ONE of many markers. There are, after all, nations which do not have a unique language: Ireland, Wales, Scotland, England, America, Canada, Australia - all have English as their language. Germans and Austrians share a language, so do some Belgians and French. Some countries, like Switzerland have several official languages (French, German, Italian and Romansh). In Singapore, moreover, where the ethnic composition is 76.4% Chinese, 14.9% Malay, 6.4% Indian - the national (derzhavna) and official language is Malay, but Chinese, Tamil and English are all official languages. Canada, at least theoretically, has two official languages, no national language as such.

All of the above illustrates that once there is a concrete political state that serves as a national marker, language is NOT THE PRIME, and certainly not the SOLE marker of national identity.

There is a possibility in contemporary Ukraine for a person calling him or herself Ukrainian (i.e. using the nation as an identity marker) not speaking Ukrainian. This is an extremely hard concept to accept for the diaspora Ukrainians, who for so long have seen the preservation of language as the major factor in the preservation of their ethnic identity.

Most of the Ukrainian diasporal history is linked with various attempts at language preservation - various bilingual schools of then and now, the Saturday schools, the persistent insistence of the community that knowing the language is of great importance. Despite this preoccupation with language retention there seems to have been and still is an enormous amount of confusion as to the desired result of language retention: was it to be an active skill, i.e., to be in daily and constant use, or was it to be just a "symbol of ethnic identity"? Studies have shown that where there is no home and school use of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ohienko. 1918. "Ukrainins'ka kul'tura", Kyiv, (republished in Kyiv 1991), pp. 239-240. Original: Мова - це наша національна ознака, в мові - наша культура, ступінь нашої свідомости. Мова - це форма нашого життя, життя культурного і національного, це форма національного організування. Мова - душа кожної національності, її святощі, її найцінніший скарб... Звичайно, не сама по собі мова, а мова, як певний орган культури, традиції. В мові - наша стара й нова культура, ознака нашого національного визнання.

Мова - це не тільки простий символ розуміння, бо вона витворюється в певній культурі, в певній традиції. В такому разі мова - це найясніший вираз нашої психіки, це найперша сторожа нашого психічного Я... І поки живе мова, житиме народ, як національність. Не стане мови - не стане й національності: вона геть розпорошиться поміж дужчим народом...

language, all that can be learned of a language is useful only for group identification and such minimal knowledge is not only insufficient for active use but might not even survive transmission to the next generation.<sup>2</sup> Since the forces of assimilation are such that it is indeed rare that Ukrainian is spoken both at home and in school, it becomes harder and harder to maintain language learning at all. It is not surprising then that the answer to the question "Why learn Ukrainian?" is usually quite vague and rarely convincing. Although elaborate reasons have been presented such as those by Senator Yuzyk below –

"Here are some of the evident advantages of the retention of mother languages and ethnic cultures: 1) It provides for cross-fertilization and mutual enrichment of the cultural strains in the development of a common Canadian culture and national personality; 2) It stimulates cultural growth and affords a wider, more direct 'grass-roots' participation of Canadians in cultural and artistic activities; 3) It helps to exploit the unique linguistic potential latent in the multi-ethnic population for Canada's greater and more effective role in international affairs, for closer cultural, commercial, and tourist relations with other countries, and for better access to foreign scholarship and the improvement of Canada's scholastic knowledge and wealth; and 4) It contributes [sic] to the development among Canadians of less parochial, more tolerant and informed attitude toward international affairs, and countries and cultures of the origin of their fellow citizens."<sup>3</sup>

- are they really convincing? In the thirty years since they have been postulated by Yuzyk one has seen that most of his reasons for retaining one's native tongue did not prove valid or were not heeded. A quick look at the census figures shows that in 1951 Ukrainian ranked as the number one mother tongue other than English or French in Canada with roughly 352 thousand speakers. In 1971 there were only 309 thousand speakers and Ukrainian placed third; in 1991 Ukrainian was fifth and the number of speakers fell to 201 thousand. In 1996 Ukrainian was eighth with only 175 thousand speakers and by 1998 it was no longer in the top ten! Ukrainian is certainly in trouble. An even more telling statistic is the "home language" indicator, that is, irrespective of the "mother tongue", what is the language spoken at home. In 1971 of the 309 thousand who gave Ukrainian as their "mother tongue" 145 thousand actually spoke the language at home. They were third as a group in Canada, preceded by Italians and Germans. In 1991 the Ukrainian group was no longer in the top ten, that is, less than 80 thousand speakers (that is the tenth position) spoke Ukrainian at home. Even more troubling is the "rate of language shift" indicator, that is the rate at which a person switches from using the mother tongue to using English. Ukrainians have a rate of 76.5, exceeded only by the Dutch whose rate is 87.2. Germans (71.2), Italians (50.6), Poles (37.9) and all the other nationalities have a smaller rate with Chinese at 15.5 being the lowest. These depressing statistics are somewhat mitigated by the "ethnic origin" table (which has nothing to do with language but with what you consider to be your origin) where Ukrainian is 9<sup>th</sup> on the list in Canada. A further proof that language is not necessarily an ethnic identity marker.

<sup>2</sup> See Jim Cummins. 1985. "Future Direction for Ukrainian-Language Education," in: M. Lupul (ed.). *Osvita - Ukrainian Bilingual Education*, Edmonton, CIUS, p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> Yuzyk, Paul. 1967. *Ukrainian Canadians: Their Place and Role in Canadian Life*, pp. 82-83.

Thus one can safely say that there is a general decline despite attempts at preservation, be these the bilingual schools in the West or renewed efforts of “ridni shkoly” in the East. At universities the enrolment in language courses has seen a steady decline. Language has ceased to be the ethnic identifier. Ukrainian dancing, Ukrainian weddings, a different calendar have become the identifiers of Ukrainian ethnicity. This was studied in “Visible Symbols”<sup>4</sup> where, one should note, “Ukrainian Language in Canada” was not one of the items of discussion at the conference in Manitoba in 1981, the proceedings of which make up that book.

In short the use, study and importance of the Ukrainian language in Canada is approaching oblivion.

## PART TWO

There is, however, some hope to be found in Ukish. A mixture of Ukrainian and English, Ukish has had as long a history as the presence of Ukrainian speakers in Canada. In short, Ukish was born with the first wave of immigrants at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is insufficient room here to do a thorough study of Ukish but suffice it to say that despite constant attacks on its existence by new waves of immigrants, despite attempts at its eradication by Ukrainian schools, Ukish persists in its existence. It has, however, undergone modifications throughout the years.

Original Ukish, which can be termed “classical”, consisted simply of English vocabulary being absorbed into the living body of the spoken Ukrainian language. It was born primarily due to the fact that the immigrants found themselves in a strange land with many elements of daily life which did not correspond to, or were different from what they had left at home. What is most interesting in the classical Ukish is that the foreign intrusions are forced into Ukrainian morphology. Alexander Royick collected samples of classical Ukish as spoken in Alberta Canada<sup>5</sup>. Although Royick collected his sample after the onslaught of the “second migration wave”, those who came to Canada after the Second World War - generally a more educated and politically conscious group, speaking a more established Ukrainian - nonetheless classical Ukish was still quite prevalent in 1965, especially among the earlier immigrants.

As the selected samples from Royick show (see appendix) there were foreign (English) absorptions into Ukrainian and their total acclimatization in the host language: box [baksynku; baksu], exhibition [artsybyshyn], July [dzhulaju], cookies [kukisy], pie [paja], buns [bansy], train [tryna], bag [begy], back lane [beklajnakh], garbage [garbychakh], bank [benkovi], river [ryveru], broke [brok], Christmas [Krismusu], drive drajvuvaty - drajvuje], fight [fajtuvatysja], law [lo], truck [trokom], farm (v) [fermaruvaty - fermaruju], hammer [hamyr], fence [fents], furnice [fomys], celer[saljeri], etc. In fact,

<sup>4</sup> Lupul, Manoly (ed.). 1984. *Visible Symbols: Cultural Expression Among Canada's Ukrainians*, Edmonton, CIUS.

<sup>5</sup> Royick, Alexander. 1965. *Lexical Borrowings in Alberta Ukrainian*. MA Dissertation, University of Alberta. (See appendix for samples.)

most are quite logical in their absorption patterns: nouns enter into the first declension according to basic structure - consonantal ending is masculine, o-ending is neuter, and a-ending is feminine. Such “morphology” allows the nouns to be fully integrated into the Ukrainian declensions. It is interesting to note that sometimes, as in the case of “box” (consonantal ending), this pattern seems to break down and the word “baksa” or the diminutive “baskynka” are created. It is hard to know precisely why this occurred, perhaps by analogy to “korobka” which is feminine in Ukrainian, but then this does not explain “ryveru” in sentence 7, where “river” - also ending in a consonant has been absorbed as the masculine noun *ryver*, despite the fact that in Ukrainian “rika” is a feminine noun.

One could go on analyzing each and every borrowing, but this is not the intent of this paper. One must, however, point to two such lexical borrowings which are strange in that they collide with existing Ukrainian words and lead to potential misunderstanding. In the Appendix sentences 17 and 20 both have such words: *halja* for hall could be misunderstood for *Halja* (girl’s name) and “katuvaty” to cut (as in to fire someone, to cut him from the list) with “katuvaty” the standard Ukrainian for “to torture.” But such misborrowing is rare. The sample chosen reveals “classical” Ukish including the phonetic interference of English in the e/y mixup (*spykla* in 4, *nysu* in 8, *vidnysy* in 15, *ny* in 16, *sampyred* in 30, *uchytylym* in 33), also some dialectical features of Western Ukrainian (*vikynuly*, *djedi* in 3, *nyn’ki* in 4, and *sy* in 7, *dvatsit* in 12, *nits* in 16 etc.).

Although one can still hear this type of classical Ukish it is becoming rare. As any “living” language (and certainly Ukish is a living language in that it is a spoken one) Ukish is undergoing constant change. Contemporary Ukish, therefore, is a bit more subtle. Even that small (and decreasing) number of people more conscious of their language, those who speak Ukrainian fluently and pride themselves on using it correctly, often show a deterioration of the Ukrainian language (often under English influence) even if no direct lexical borrowings occur. Modern Ukish is not as obvious as the classical Ukish but it is not standard Ukrainian.

A few samples of this type of Ukish will have to suffice:

- 1) Як ти любила цей фільм? A direct calque of the English “How did you like this film”? Instead of the standard Ukrainian Як тобі подобався цей фільм?
- 2) Я їм гліб, бо я голодний. Loss of differentiation between the phonemes “h” and “kh” since English has no such differentiation.
- 3) Я дуже вдоволена з моїм прізвищем. Я слухаю до музики. In both sentences English prepositional governing prevails over the Ukrainian.

Even more extreme is the complete loss of flexion, first in the vocative case where only the nominative is used, and later in other cases: “Ja pyshu z pero. Daj tse do tato.” The lack of flexion is especially prevalent when the sentence is longer or complex and the various grammatical links become vague in the speaker’s mind due to an insufficient knowledge and use of the language. In one of my classes I heard the following: “На

скільки коротше друга байка чим перший?” Where the student apparently forgot that the last word also refers to the feminine noun “bajka”.

Another aspect of contemporary Ukish consists of aspiration of consonants as in English and diphthongization of vowels. Thus the Ukrainian “to” (that) sound like [thow]. Finally, in contrast to classical Ukish, modern Ukish does not readily adopt English words into Ukrainian but brings the lexical items in their English form: Ja Tobi dav ti samples - instead of sempli (as it would be in classical Ukish), Os’ mij file - instead of mij fajl’ or moja fajlja. This type of “bilingualism” is more and more prevalent, especially in the current computer terminology. A similar pattern occurs in those who are of Ukrainian origin when they speak in English. Intrusion of Ukrainian words into English especially when the words relate to things particularly Ukrainian: zabava, skhodyny, Malanka, SUM, Plast, domivka etc. Such as:

“Did you go to the zabava last night? How was the Malanka? God, I got skhodyny to go to.”

With the advent of the newest wave of immigrants Ukish is once again under threat. How it will change, only time will tell. Ukish, however, will probably survive and flourish even if standard Ukrainian disappears from use among Canada’s Ukrainians. What is certain now is that with the reestablishment of an independent Ukraine, language is no longer necessary as an identity marker and in Canada, in fact, it has ceased in this function, even before the reestablishment of Ukraine. What is also certain is that the use of Ukrainian is declining in Canada. Whether the language is heading toward total extinction will depend on many factors not the least of which is the fate of the language in contemporary Ukraine. Even though it is the official language it is by far not ubiquitous in Ukraine. Russian remains a threat, while “surzhyk” - the Russo-Ukrainian melange - threatens to become the new koine. Only if Ukrainian asserts itself as a truly indispensable tool of daily activity will it survive.

## APPENDIX:

(NB the number following the sample indicates the page in Royick’s collection).

Royick samples:

1. Зробив баксинку сквирову на апстизі - 60
2. В Едмонтоні буди файний арцибишин в джулаю. - 60
3. Ми вікинули баксу книжок на двір по смерті нашого дєді. - 61
4. Я нинькі кукіси спикла, пая зробила, а завтра спичу кекси і банси.- 62
5. Злізли ми з трина і несемо ті беги на плечах. - 62
6. Ходжу в Едмонтоні по беклайнах і шукаю хліба по гарбичах. - 63
7. Корови си лишили на бенкові риверу. - 63
8. Нису на блинкиті дитину. - 64
9. Ми вже були брок від Крісмусу. - 65

12. Я тут від двацiт третього року фермарую. - 71
13. Пiди вiзьми гамир i пофiксуй фенц. - 71
14. Ми мали старий форнис у салерi. - 72
15. Вiдниси то i вкинь там до гербич кену. - 73
16. В Пiс Ривер ни було нiц: оден гросирштор i старий готель з льогiв. - 74
17. Вони на галю грошi давали. - 76
18. Як ми поiхали були... до Миксико на голiдей... - 78
19. Я робив карпентерку, а на жнива ходив на треш. - 80
20. Чехи почали катувати вчителiв-украiнцiв. - 80
21. Вони кемпували i будували бовта. - 80
22. Я киную капусту i огiрки на зиму. - 81
23. Я дав шiсть тисяч кеш. - 81
24. Ти мусиш поклiнувати собi шуси. - 81
25. Я колектував грошi i давав до штору. - 81
26. Я мав файний крап пшеницi. - 82
27. Ми мешкали через лайну вiд них. - 84
28. Ми ззили лонч. - 85
29. Тогди продавали тано льоти на Бонивiлi. - 85
30. Я насамперед робив в майнi. - 86
31. Мiй брат Роман тепер менеджером банку... - 86
32. Де мисиз Пухкий. - 87
33. Одна моя дочка норсою, а син учитилим. - 87
34. Всьо пiшло олрайт. - 88
35. Штири патики поставив, а на них пайпу i так жив. - 88
36. Кожда курова давала пейло молока. - 89
37. Я не мiг дiстати райда до мiста. - 90
38. Украiнцi робили в сiпiярi довгi роки. - 92
39. Залiзь у свою слiпiнгбегу i мовчи. - 93
40. Мiй тато був сорi. - 93
41. Мiй козин гонить стрiтгару в мiстi. - 94
42. Мiй син має новий трок. - 98
43. Я купила собi вчера векюм клiнер. - 99
44. Наш бовт змiстував дорогу. - 102