

Undoing previous language planning in independent Ukraine: a battle for national and linguistic empowerment

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Language planning and politics, and the use of the Ukrainian language have always been highly emotive and politically charged issues in Ukraine, spanning various historical epochs—from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires to the Soviet Union and the independence era since 1991. Territorial differences resulting from Ukraine’s subdivision among several states have contributed to variations in language use and the spread of Russian and Ukrainian/Russian bilingualism. The imposed downgrade and suppression of Ukrainian language and culture, coupled with the promotion and enforcement of the Russian language during the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, led to the emergence and spread of the so-called Surzhyk, a mixed Ukrainian-Russian variety.

The paper examines some key principles of pre-independence language planning, including consistent Russification and the devaluation or outright banning of Ukrainian language and culture. It also delves into developments since 1989 when “The Law on Languages in Ukrainian SSR” was enacted, officially declaring Ukrainian as the state language while constitutionally safeguarding other languages spoken in Ukraine.

The central research question focuses on identifying predominant features in the process of undoing previous status and corpus planning in independent Ukraine within the context of decolonization. To address this, we conducted textual analysis of major documents, media publications, and presentations by influential political figures and academics in Ukraine with the aim of identifying principal language policy and planning directions and key traits since the independence of Ukraine in 1991. The process of Ukrainization and undoing previous language planning was not always smooth and straightforward; decolonisation required further actions. Examples such as the Orange revolution (2003-04) and Euromaidan (2013-14) highlight post-colonial struggle for independence and democracy, with the ideology of Ukrainization playing a significant role.

Furthermore, we explore recent language planning developments since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and analyse the impact of the war on the linguistic landscape, worldviews, attitudes, and language use across the country. Finally, we consider the emerging language situation, with Ukrainian playing a pivotal role as the sole state language and a symbol of independence in contemporary Ukraine.