

Linguistics Applied to the Ukrainian Russian War

In an increasingly globalized yet divided world, communication is vital. Humans can only truly attempt to understand each other through the connections linguistics provide. I believe that language is partially responsible for the Russian-Ukrainian War and is an overlooked part of the solution due to its role before and during the growing conflict.

First, to understand the importance of linguistics in war, one needs a basic understanding of some of the principles of linguistics. The Theory of Linguistic Relativity and the idea of a Linguistic Cognitive Universe both play an important role in war and international relations as they shape how humans perceive the world around them and therefore adopt different biases. The Theory of Linguistic Relativity, first introduced by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, suggests that the structure of a language influences its speaker's cognitive process (Frothingham, *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*). This theory supports scientist Lera Boroditsky's idea of a Linguistic Cognitive Universe, the idea that the native language of an individual shapes their reality (Boroditsky, *How Language Shapes the Way We Think*). When applied to the Ukrainian-Russian War, it is important to note that both languages branch from the Slavic family and therefore have a lot of similarities. While this remains true, in this essay, I plan to discuss the various factors of the Ukrainian and Russian languages that both divide and unite.

The Ukrainian war highlights key differences between two Slavic siblings, Ukrainian and Russian, and turns a means of connection into war. For context, before the fighting, Ukrainian didn't reach the scale of popularity of the Russian language. This is exemplified by the norm that before the war, all Ukrainians were expected to learn Russian, but not the other way around (Blanco, Wilson, Zakryzhevskyy, *Language matters: What learners need to know about Ukrainian*). This kind of attitude is still reflected in current messages from the Ukrainian President Zelensky, as he often delivers his messages in Ukrainian, Russian, and English while Putin only speaks in Russian. Furthermore, The State Language Law passed in 2019 by former

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko that required all Ukrainian print media outlets always to have a publication of their work in Ukrainian serves as another testament to the fading popularity of the Ukrainian language (Denber, *New Language Requirement Raises Concerns in Ukraine*). This popularity divide between the two languages contributed to the split between the two countries. It bred resentment and made it harder for citizens on either side to communicate effectively with each other.

Language also affects actual combat. A prime example of this is how shibboleths, a means of identifying a person of a different linguistic background from yourself, have been used by soldiers. Applied to the war, Ukrainian soldiers have been reported utilizing shibboleths to check from far away if a soldier is Russian or one of their own (Blanco, Wilson, Zakryzhevskyy, *Language matters: What learners need to know about Ukrainian*). They can simply call out a Ukrainian word that's difficult for native Russian speakers to pronounce, and if the soldier can yell back the same word with accurate pronunciation, soldiers can be sure that the figure in the distance is Ukrainian. Personally, I think this is clever but also sad. It's an example of how languages can divide and emphasize differences.

More subtle linguistic choices can furthermore play a larger role in the war. In English, Americans would say "The Ukraine" instead of just "Ukraine", as we're used to using today. Using "The Ukraine" implies that Ukraine is a territory, not an independent country. Similarly, English speakers say "The Midwest", implying that The Midwest is a territory of the US. After gaining independence in 1991, the Ukrainian government requested that the Russian preposition В be used instead of На, due to the same reason American English speakers dropped the "the" when speaking about Ukraine (Blanco, Wilson, Zakryzhevskyy, *Language matters: What learners need to know about Ukrainian*). Officially, in 2012, the Ukrainian embassy in London declared that using "the" in front of Ukraine was incorrect and asked that countries not use it in English-language publications (Kirk, *Why Ukraine isn't called 'the Ukraine'*). While this debate may seem folly, it has more meaning than many would believe.

Even today in Russia and Russian-speaking countries, advocates for or against the war can express their feelings through prepositions without explicitly doing so.

Linguistics is a present factor in negotiations as well. As I mentioned earlier, both Putin and Zelensky have been delivering speeches through various media outlets. A notable difference between the two is how Zelensky uses multiple languages, Ukrainian, Russian, and English, in order to appeal to his different audiences and in a way, connect with them. Zelensky is taking advantage of the *Foreign Language Effect* (FLE) as an effective negotiation tactic. Simply put, FLE is the theory that reasoning in a non-native language affects the process of understanding and acquiring knowledge (McFarlane, Perez, Weissglass, *Thinking in a Non-native Language: A New Nudge?*). FLE allows speakers to change their perspective depending on the language they communicate in and can consequently open up new possibilities for negotiation as new languages provide new perspectives. This strategy isn't anything new, one of my favorite and most well-known examples of this is how Nelson Mandela learned Afrikaans while imprisoned in Robben Island to negotiate more effectively with white oppressors during Apartheid (Laka, *Mandela was right: the Foreign Language Effect*). This caused outrage among many of Mandela's supporters, as the movement to dissolve the language associated with segregation and suffering was strong; although today some historians associate the language with the resilience and liberation that took place after Apartheid. However, if it wasn't for Mandela's efforts, negotiations that we look back on today as helping end Apartheid most likely wouldn't have been successful. Now, years later, history repeats itself. As more Ukrainian territories suffer attacks and Russian control, maybe a lesson can be learned from the world's history book.

There is no perfect ending to the war. Lives have been lost, worlds have been overturned, and global relations have reached a new era. The new goal should be healing. Both Russia and Ukraine need to focus on communication in order to effectively build a world where both countries can peacefully coexist and their citizens can live their lives without fear. This will

take a long time to happen and is much easier said than done, but first, someone needs to take the opening step. Pope Francis expressed this sentiment accurately when he said, "It (dialogue) is always a step forward, with an outstretched hand, always. Because otherwise we close the only reasonable door to peace" (Pullella, *Pope says supplying weapons to Ukraine is morally acceptable for self defense*).

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