Bilingual Linguistic and National Identity (A Case Study of the Sociolinguistic Surveys in Ukraine)

Abstract: The article explores the problems of the correlation of linguistic, ethnic, and national identity, and defines related terms and concepts. It also considers the issues of bilingual individuals’ linguistic and national identity. The practical analysis of the current language situation in Ukraine, defined as bilingual, is based on a sociolinguistic survey from May 2022. The theoretical conclusions of the research define ethnic identity as the awareness of an individual’s belonging to a specific group in society and, as a result, sharing values and guidelines for their worldview and communicative behaviour with this group’s representatives. According to the survey, one of the distinguishing features of how Ukrainian citizens determine their national identity is the citizenship criterion. Therefore, national and linguistic identity is a historically changing phenomenon that, under certain conditions and at different times, is determined by the awareness of belonging to a social group within the boundaries of a single state and is associated with the state language. This identity is a two-sided semiotic, discursive construction that manifests signs to distinguish “Us” from “Them”. Currently, in Ukraine, amid the war with Russia, bilingual Ukrainians almost unanimously identify themselves as Ukrainians by nationality, which indicates unity and patriotism. Nevertheless, there are no established criteria for defining ethnic, national, and linguistic identities. The significance and relevance of the situation determine the discursive construction claiming hegemony at this historical moment under these historical conditions. In
this regard, national identity is believed to be a dynamic process conditioned by the discursive construction prevailing over a given period. It unites the nation when it faces challenges to cope with.

Keywords: ethnic identity, language identity, national identity, language situation, bilingualism, discursive construction.

The linguistic and national identity issue is relevant as its applied aspect provides the best language policy methods in multilingual and multinational countries. Language planning in such communities implies a comprehensive analysis of the cultural, historical and political factors that determine this linguistic situation. This research should serve as a basis for the decisions regarding the languages’ legal status and functioning in multinational countries. The choice of the language policy’s best methods will prevent language-based conflicts and promote the harmonic co-existing of various languages, each being native for some citizens.

The research into linguistic and national identity is of an interdisciplinary nature. It is determined by the fact that ethnic and national identity relates to an individual’s awareness of belonging to a certain ethnicity as a result of the shared ideas about the world, values, culture, history, faith, language, and communicative behaviour shaped in the process of socialisation and interaction with not only the representatives of their own ethnicity («Us») but also with other ethno cultural communities («Them»). According to John Joseph, «the concepts of nation and national language is that they are defined crucially by difference from one’s closest neighbours».

The issues of correlation between language and identity have been explored since the early XXth century when the theory of identity emerged in humanitarian knowledge. This led to the identification of language as a key factor of national identity and national consciousness. This work interprets national identity as bilateral, discursive, historically flexible construction presented as a system of symbols marking the border between «Us and Them». You are either «one of

1 V. Kulyk, Movna polityka v bahatomovnykh krainakh. Zakordonniy dosvid ta yoho prydatnist dlia Ukrainy, Kyiv 2021.
3 See for example: Demska, Masenko, Matuzkova, Tkachuk.
us» or you are «one of them», and language is often see as a key indicator of an individual’s positioning with respect to this dichotomy. The exposure and the description of such symbolic signs, their dynamics and combinations determine various focus areas in how linguists study identity.

National identity has relations with national self-consciousness. National self-consciousness consists of knowledge and presentations of national community, its historical past and present, spiritual and material culture, language and national character.

There are three conceptions of roots of Ukrainian national identity. The first is a chauvinistic conception. According to this conception the Ukrainian nation never existed. It’s only a dialect group of Russian nation. The second is unity of three nations – Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian and the senior brother is Russian nation and Ukrainian and Belorussian are juniors. The third conception is the autochthonous-autonomic conception (the author is M. Hrushevsky)⁴. Since independence, M. Hrushevsky’s concept has been the most widely used in the country and has become dominant.

This paper uses the term ‘nation’ to refer to a certain community, which identifies itself as the citizens of a certain state, living in a common territory. Of course, this understanding of the nation implies that the concept of ethnicity encompasses belonging to a certain community by origin, that is, according to the hereditary criterion. Therefore, national identity, unlike ethnic identity, is a form of identification with a certain state system through a system of symbols and discourses because states are not only political entities but also systems of cultural representation/description. National identity, in this case, is constantly maintained by multiple discursive positions in space and time, which are unstable and changeable⁵.

Ethnic identity is determined based on the language criterion (native language) and/or is imitated, chosen not due to a conscious choice, but based on the parents’ origin. On the other hand, the ‘native language’ concept is also quite controversial in modern science because determining the role of the language factor in the identification process is directly related to the interpretation of the


concepts of ‘native language’ and ‘language of everyday communication.’ Thus, one can speak about differences in ethnic and national identities.

Europe is currently experiencing a renaissance of national identity. This also applies to Ukraine. A characteristic feature of this process is the growing role of the ethnic factor. In this regard, it is especially important for our country to answer the question: who are we and what do we want? To answer these questions, we need a clear and reasoned answer to the question of the formation of the Ukrainian political nation. What are the essence and characteristics of the Ukrainian political nation? Unfortunately, we do not have an answer to this question.

The European policy’s standards require the broad support of modern society’s multilingual and multicultural nature. Despite globalisation trends, there are also facts to evidence the higher significance and success of nationalistic political projects across the globe. It is proposed to treat the problem considering not just Ukrainian contexts but global contexts as well including cultural, political, economic ones with the main stress on economic and cultural, and understanding «the fiction that language is a perfectly homogeneous system in a perfectly homogeneous speech community has long been exposed as an absurd myth, or rather a methodological abstraction».

It provides for seeking answers to the following disputed questions: 1) how do balanced bilingual individuals determine their linguistic and national identity? 2) Is the double national identity in bilingual individuals possible? 3) Can bilingual individuals identify themselves with two ethnicities when they, for instance, have bilingual parents who represent different linguistic communities? It takes serious research effort and a scientific discussion to answer these questions, as they are pressing and ultimately significant for Ukrainian society; that is currently tackling with war and needs unity as ever before, because this is a matter of the survival of the people and the country as a whole.

So, the goal of this article is to answer these questions as the results of the recent sociological surveys provide ample material to establish the Ukrainians’ both linguistic priorities and national identity.

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The results of the surveys, carried out before 2014, regarding the views on the relevant status of the Ukrainian and Russian languages proved to be vague and ambivalent amid the country’s regional polarisation. It makes it even more interesting to compare data from the previous years’ surveys against the most recent results. This paper will focus exclusively on the answers covering the language used for everyday communication (respondents who mostly use both languages) and identification with a certain nationality, as well as the criteria of such identification.

We start with seeking the reasons for the answers given to the questions above, exploring the works of scientists and analysing the results of several sociolinguistic surveys in Ukraine, conducted at different times, namely in 2017 and 2022. It also aims to discover the influence of discursive construction on the linguistic and national identity of bilingual citizens of Ukraine. For this purpose, it will analyse the definition of the bilingualism and discursive constructions.

The bilingualism involves a free command of two languages simultaneously in a situation where both languages are often used in communication. The bilingualism mechanism implies the ability to alternate two languages, using formed switching skills easily. A bilingual person can switch between languages, depending on the situation and his or her interlocutors. Absolute bilingualism implies a completely identical command of languages in all communication situations, which is impossible to achieve. This is because the experience a person acquires using one language always differs from the experience acquired when using another language. Emotions associated with one language distinguish from emotions associated with another one. The manifestation of emotions, their nature and intensity, functions and evaluations have national-specific, culturally fixed features that are reflected in discourse and form communicative ethnostyles. In other words, individuals have different levels of command of their two languages since there are no two completely identical social spheres where these languages operate and the cultures they represent. Therefore, the definition of bilingualism does not imply absolute fluency in both languages. If one language does not interfere with the second, and this second is developed to a high degree, close to the

8 See for example: Dotsenko, Kulyk, Korostelina, The position of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine in 2020. Analytical review.
language proficiency of a native speaker, it indicates balanced bilingualism. The language that an individual speaks better is called dominant; it is not necessarily the first language this person has learnt.

The language balance may change in favour of one or another language under relevant conditions: one language may partially degrade, stop developing, be driven out and even go out of use (language death); or, on the contrary, be revived (for example, the modern Irish language in Ireland), thanks to the language policy, be maintained and promoted to the level of official recognition and use. These arguments are fair not only regarding individual speakers but also regarding linguistic communities as a whole.

However, we have to notice on the problem of Ukrainians’ individual bilingualism when out of the two languages – Ukrainian and Russian – the dominant one is Russian, which, being in dissonance with the political dominance of Ukrainian, causes psychological tension in society. Its alleviation requires understanding the nature of bilingualism dependent on a number of interrelated neurocognitive and societal factors that determine dominance of the individual’s particular language. Researchers of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism discusses such issues as: interaction of socio-political and individual planes of Ukrainian bilingualism as a psychological problem, neurocognitive and societal factors of linguistic dominance in their interplay, as well as political aspects for creating successful language planning.

The monograph «Language Policy in Multilingual Countries. Foreign Experience and its Suitability for Ukraine» by the Ukrainian political scientist Vолодимир Кулик analyses the experience of language conflict solutions in different countries. Among other things, the author indicates that «[…] I am interested in those countries, the government of which opt for single language despite their population being multilingual: this is the choice that many political figures and regular citizens deem the best for Ukraine.»


One of the most remarkable disputes in Ukrainian politics of the recent 30 years has been the language issue, mostly questioning the Russian language’s status compared to the Ukrainian language. This dispute aggravates from time to time, especially during the elections; however, it is barely remembered in between.\(^{13}\) The question of whether the language ideas and orientations of Ukrainians are so polarised and unwavering as the political elite try to present them, remains vague. It can be answered through the survey results that prove notable differences between the language orientations of different segments of Ukrainian citizens. It is apparent that the answers given by the respondents regarding the state language policy were influenced not only by the language they speak but also by the language they see as their native.

According to sociological surveys in Ukraine, over 50% of Ukrainian citizens speak two languages in their everyday communication – Russian and Ukrainian; hence they are bilingual. Therefore, the issues of ethnic and national identities of bilingual individuals shall be seen as relevant since, according to the statistics, such people account for over half of the world’s population.

Contemporary Ukraine features the situation of revitalising the Ukrainian language, broadening of the spheres it is used in, and driving the Russian language out of the cultural and linguistic space. Thanks to the state’s language policy and the comprehensive support of Ukrainian-language projects, appropriate discursive constructs are created to reinforce the government’s ideological priorities. This is especially critical while fighting Russian aggression when an ideological emphasis is placed on the unity of all the country’s inhabitants. The acknowledgement that today Ukrainian citizens, who were previously discursively divided into Ukrainian and Russian speakers, need unison and solidarity has led to active propaganda of unity in the media and political discourses.

The identification is a process when an individual learns about the world and his or her attitude towards it from other people. Signs of ethnic and linguistic identities are believed to be manifested through statements about whom people consider themselves to be and to what community (ethnic and linguistic) they belong. Modern identity researchers highlight that knowledge about one’s identity is formed under the influence of discursive practices and is fixed

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in a certain symbolic form, primarily in the language and the corresponding discursive constructions. «An identity is to be found in the embodied habits of social life, including language.» The hypothesis that identities are discursive constructions relies on the idea of the language not as merely a mirror that reflects the independent material world but as a tool that helps shape our world and us. Thus, this view on the correlation between language and ethnic identity contributed to the emergence of a cognitive-discursive linguistic paradigm in linguistic identity studies.

In 2022 political scientist Volodymyr Kulyk ordered the survey for the fifth time, largely asking the same questions – on the language and a little about identity to study changes in the answers. The latest survey took place in May 2017. «Comparing the new data with the previous ones allows to assess the changes over the past five years, and especially over the past ten months – since it can be assumed that the most fundamental changes were caused by the full-scale war.»

According to the respondents’ answers, 95% of the residents of Ukraine associated themselves with Ukrainian nationality today (obviously, with a reference made to the territories controlled by Ukraine). 2% associated themselves with Russian; dual nationality was indicated by only 1% of the respondents. In 2017, these figures were 88%, 7% and 3%, respectively. However, today, an increase in the share of national identity-based Ukrainians was primarily due to the East and South of Ukraine. Speaking about the Ukrainians’ bilingualism, those using two languages in their everyday life (mainly Ukrainian or Russian) can be seen as bilingual. In total, in 2017, 54% were bilingual, while in 2022, this number was 50%. At home, 40% and 38% communicated with their family in two languages, and at work – 66% and 44%, respectively. Hence, a decrease in the share of bilingual individuals against 2017 was recorded. Currently, there are 50% of bilingual Ukrainians, among whom a larger percentage are the residents of the Centre, East and South of the country. National Ukrainian identification was voiced by 95% in 2022, while in 2017, this number amounted to 88%; only 2% and 7%, respectively, opted for dual identity. In other words, among 50% of bilingual Ukrainians,

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14 See for example: Korostelyna, Yavorska.
15 J.E. Joseph, op. cit., p. 100.
16 V. Kulyk, Mova ta identychnist v Ukrayini na kinets 2022 roku [Language and Identity in Ukraine as of the late 2022], https://zbruc.eu/node/114247 [accessed on: 8.01.2023].
only 2% had a dual Ukrainian-Russian national identity. One may suggest that dual nationality as such has been unacceptable since Soviet times or that the affiliation of bilingual individuals to the Ukrainian nation became evidence of patriotic elevation during the war against Russia. Yet, no matter how likely these motives may sound, the answers to questions about the criteria for determining national identity are quite indicative: Ukrainian citizens consider the nationality of their parents to be a decisive factor: 48% in 2022 and 48% in 2017; 36% and 24% determined their nationality by the country; the language was suggested as the reason only by 3% both in 2022 and 2017 (identical percentage). All these figures indicate a weak (almost neglectable) correlation between the languages of communication and national identification among bilingual individuals.

Ukrainians who use only the Ukrainian language in their everyday life amount to 41% (2022) and 34% (2017), while 95% and 88% were said to be Ukrainians by nationality. Respondents who use exclusively Russian are 12% and 6%, while Russian nationality was chosen by 7% and 2%, respectively. So, there are adequate reasons to believe that national identity is becoming a political rather than ethnic category and that «its distribution does not reflect the population’s ethnic composition [...] Nationality should be considered to be ethnonational identity, that is a combination of ethnic and national (civil) identities, with the prevalence of the latter».

Conclusions
In sum, it should be noted that understanding of identity – ethnic, national and linguistic – features no established criteria. The situation’s significance and its relevance determine the discursive construction that claims hegemony at a given historical moment amid given historical conditions. In this regard, we believe that national languages and identities are in a complex, dialectical interaction, which should be a matter of interest and study in science. National identification is a dynamic process determined by the discursive construction prevailing in a given period of time, thanks to which the nation is united in the face of the challenges it encounters.

The attitude towards the languages at the level of state policy in Ukraine always changes together with power shifts. This is evidenced by all the results of

17 V. Kulyk, Mova ta identychnist v Ukrayini na kinets 2022 roku [Language and Identity in Ukraine as of the late 2022], https://zbruc.eu/node/114247 [accessed on: 8.01.2023].
sociological polls for the entire period of independence. Currently, the bilingual Ukrainians almost unanimously identify themselves as Ukrainians by nationality, which indicates unity and patriotism. However, even the optimistic results of the surveys, which do confirm the existence of certain, but not so significant, differences between the linguistic orientations of different parts of the Ukrainian population, do not provide guarantees of conflict-free coexistence on linguistic grounds. In our opinion, we need to take into account that identity is determined by language preference rather than by actual language use.

The search for unity in Ukrainian society should be sought not so much in the past and in history but in the present and future of the country, which, despite consolidation and unity against the aggressor country, is still unlikely to get rid of internal conflicts – cross-regional, political, social, etc. – in the post-war period. This is the reason why the analysis of trends in the preferences of language and national identity will help form the discursive practices that contribute to the unity and prosperity of Ukraine in the future.

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