The Politics of Language in Wartime Ukraine

[00:00:02] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** The events of February 2022 changed the life of every

Ukrainian in Ukraine and beyond.

[00:00:10] **News grab:** Ukraine has declared a state of emergency.

[00:00:13] **News grab:** The full-scale invasion that intelligence officials had been warning about for weeks is now underway, and there are reports of explosions and attacks at several major Ukrainian cities, starting in the city of Kyiv. As air raid sirens rang out across Kyiv, authorities confirmed Russian troops had crossed the border into the country.

[00:00:38] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** When your whole family is in a war-torn country, each day brings the unknown. Where will Russia's missiles or drones strike next? What are the updates from the battlefield? Is everyone you know okay? Are they alive? I was born in Dnipro, a large industrial city in Eastern Central Ukraine. I caught the tail end of the Soviet Union as a child, but my formative years were in the independent Ukrainian

state. Growing up, I remember being surrounded by the Russian language. It was everywhere. I went to the only Ukrainian English school in the city. In class, teachers

and students used Ukrainian, and outside the class, Russian. This was how I talked with my childhood friends, classmates, and later peers and friends at university. My mother and her side of the family spoke Russian. My father's family were speakers of Ukrainian as their first language. They lived in the outskirts of a small town in the region of Cherkasy, in the center of Ukraine. They had a decent block of land, grew their own vegetables and fruit, and had chickens and rabbits.

[00:02:26] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** I've been glued to the news since the start of the full scale invasion of Ukraine. In an attempt to be of some help, I've run a few fundraisers, including one for the victims of a missile strike on a 9 story residential building in Dnipro in January 2023.

[00:02:45] **News grab:** A 9 story apartment block once stood in this part of Dnipro. Now after a deadly missile attack, all that's left is a gaping hole and piles of rubble. Emergency services are racing to save people stuck in the wreckage.

[00:03:02] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** That strike was only 500 meters away from a similar looking 9 story building where my father lives. He was lucky. After the initial shock of the invasion, watching the tragedy unfold, followed by a feeling of guilt common among the Ukrainian diaspora, I started to rethink what I can do to support Ukraine.

[00:03:31] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** This is The Secret Life of Language, a podcast from the School of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Melbourne. My name is Olga Maxwell. I'm Ukrainian. For many years, I've made my life in Australia. I'm an applied linguist at the School of Languages and Linguistics, the University of Melbourne. As a linguist, I'm interested in the role of language in this war, language issues and language choices in post independent Ukraine, and how these are intertwined with the politics

and history of the region.

[00:04:10] **News grab:** Outside of gunfire and bombings, there's another battle playing out in parts of Ukraine with Ukrainians openly rejecting Russian language and culture. Some going as far as shredding Russian books and eliminating the Russian language from their dialogue altogether.

[00:04:25] **News grab:** The words have the same meaning, but they're no longer spoken in Russian at Saint Michael's Cathedral in Kyiv. The service here is performed only in Ukrainian.

[00:04:40] **News grab:** Few cities in Ukraine are making as much effort as Kharkiv, a city with a Russian speaking tradition to erase their past. Hundreds of streets with Soviet names have been renamed. Dozens of monuments demolished, and countless books written in Ukrainian have replaced Russian ones on bookshelves.

[00:05:02] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** In this episode, we'll be hearing from a historian, and a sociolinguist, and a few others to explore the complexities of the language question in Ukraine.

[00:05:22] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Ukraine is a nation of many languages. Depending on where you are in Ukraine, you can hear Hungarian, Crimean Tartar, Romanian, or Polish, but it's the Ukrainian and Russian languages that are at the heart of Russia's

war against Ukraine. These two have coexisted for centuries on the territory of present- day Ukraine.

[00:05:45] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** I'm originally from a village in the eastern part of Ukraine, which is located in the east of Kharkiv region. I was born and raised in Ukrainian speaking family and went to school in the same area after a couple of years in this village school I went to study at another school in neighbourhood city, which was a very kind of developed industrial city. But still, the primary language of my education was same Ukrainian, but here I faced, for the first time, the a bigger number of people who spoke Russian. I went to Kharkiv where I entered university, a historical department,

and then I faced really different environment when most of the population in these cities would be speaking Russian in their public spaces and, Ukrainian at home, with friends, and studying at university. Also, what was interesting is that with my friends who also came from the rural areas, but from other regions of Ukraine, like Western part, central, or eastern part, when we met together, we would speak surzhyk, like our common

native variation of Ukrainian, and it was very natural for us, and we would not make any distinctions whether it's correct Ukrainian, and also it was very natural for us.

[00:07:09] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** That was historian Iryna Skubii, who is currently affiliated with Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. In her research, Iryna looks at early Soviet Ukraine, its economy, its environment, and the history of famines in the first half of the twentieth century.

[00:07:28] **Dr Natalia Kudriavtseva:** I was born in Kryvyi Rih. This is an industrial city in southeastern Ukraine, and growing up there in the eighties and nineties meant having a predominantly Russian language environment. My school was a Russian medium

school with Ukrainian language and literature taught only as subjects. My university was largely Russian speaking. My parents while speaking Russian all the time because it was the language of their education as well as their profession, engineering. My grandmother was probably the only one providing some Ukrainian language in performing. She comes from a village in Chernihiv region, and she's always been speaking Ukrainian.

[00:08:06] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** That's the voice of Natalia Kudriavtseva. Natalia is a sociolinguist and Professor of translation and Slavic studies at Kryvyi Rih State

Pedagogical University in Ukraine. She focuses on language policies, identity, and grassroots Ukrainian language revitalization. Her recent work looks at how Ukraine's speakers of Russian are now shifting to speaking Ukrainian and what motivates them. As we've heard, for Ukrainians, the experience of living comfortably amid 2 or even 3 languages, is not uncommon. Yet Russia's military aggression has brought a kind of clarification to the minds of many people, and quite a few are now reevaluating their everyday language choices. We'll hear more about people converting from Russian to Ukrainian a little later, but first, a bit of background. The issue of Ukrainian Russian bilingualism in Ukraine is complex. During the Soviet era, Russian and Ukrainians served different social functions within a community, a phenomenon we linguists refer to as diglossia. Russian was the high language. It was prestigious and linked with power and social status. It was the language of the elite, the educated, the media, the government. It opened doors to education and better job opportunities. Ukrainian was the low language, a provincial village language with little prestige. The Soviet era also saw the emergence of a stereotype in popular culture. People who spoke Ukrainian

were viewed as uncultured oafs. It's easy to find this stereotype in Soviet literature and cinema. For example, Vladimir Nabokov, the famous Russian American writer, had this to say in 1959 about the influential novelist, playwright, and author of short stories Nikolai Gogol, who was born in Ukraine and chose to write in Russian.

[00:10:27] **Vladimir Nabokov (revoiced from written word):** We must thank fate and the author's thirst for a universal fame for his not having turned to the Ukrainian dialect as a medium of expression because then all would have been lost.

[00:10:40] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Ukrainian was made a state language in 1989 when the Soviet Ukrainian Republic adopted the law of languages. In a way, the recognition of Ukrainian as an official and legitimate language amounted to the rejection of the long history of colonial language ideologies imposed by Imperial Russia and later the Soviet Union. At the very onset of Ukraine's independence in 1991, Russian still dominated in large urban centers and the media space.

[00:11:14] **Dr Natalia Kudriavtseva:** Natalia Kudryavtsava. In Ukraine since independence, the dominant ideology has been the perception of Ukrainian as a marker of identity, and this is quite natural. The beginning of nation and state building and the beginning of the Ukrainian language revitalization, which has been part of this

independent nation state building project. Periods of social upheaval, and Ukraine has seen quite a few, are often accompanied by heightened concerns over authenticity and social legitimacy. That is tumultuous times raise questions of who is who, and this is how identity comes to the fore. Since 2014, which is the beginning of Russian aggression, there has been another ideology for Ukrainian, which is gaining more and more prominence. This is the view of Ukrainian as a means of communication in

Ukraine. And the advancement of this ideology signals 2 important things, that speaking Ukrainian is not any longer perceived as a mock practice, and that Ukrainian is not any longer believed to be endangered as it was in the early post Soviet years. Both of these views are very promising in terms of the Ukrainian language vitality and further extension because language should be perceived as unmarked choice in order to be spoken by all.

[00:12:31] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Before the full scale invasion in 2022, little was known outside Ukraine about its vibrant culture, history, and language landscape. Russia's propaganda machine, meanwhile, generated and continues to generate a torrent of false narratives about the use of languages in Ukraine.

[00:12:52] **Dr Natalia Kudriavtseva:** People often rely on this simplistic division of Ukraine's population into Ukrainian speakers and Russian speakers. And they tend to forget about other languages spoken in Ukraine as minority languages. And there are more than 70 minority languages spoken here, such as Polish, Czech, Slovak, Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Romanian, and many others. Ukraine is a multilingual country, and Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism is very wide spread. And if in the 1990s, there was an idea that this bilingualism was a transitional stage towards the future complete displacement of Ukrainian from use, it was already in 2008 that the prestige of speaking Ukrainian and English superseded the prestige of Russian. And though younger generations were still relying on Russian, the shift towards Russian ended around 2012. And since the Euromaidan and the beginning of Russian aggression, that is since 2013, 2014, there has been, a clear growing shift towards Ukrainian among all generations. And we see it not only in growing numbers of speakers who report Ukrainian as their language of everyday use in various nationwide surveys. We also see it in the emergence of grassroots Ukrainian language popularization, which has been a very popular trend since 2013 and even more so after the February of last year. By grassroots Ukrainian language popularization, I mean volunteer Ukrainian language

initiatives, which are organized by regular people mean that these people are professional Ukrainian language teachers and they voluntarily organize in the nationwide networks to help other people who still speak Russian as their first language to transition, to switch, to speak in Ukrainian in their everyday lives. Since 2013, there have already been 2 of such nationwide networks that appeared in Ukraine, and those are free Ukrainian language courses and another project called United, Yedyni, which appeared in the April of last year.

[00:15:18] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Language is very much part of the current war. One of the key pretexts for Russia's aggression against Ukraine both in 2014 and 2022 was the so called need to protect 'ruskoyazychnoye naseleniye' or the Russian speaking population in Ukraine. According to historian, Serhii Plokhy, the ideologists of the Russo-Ukrainian war go back to the 19th century. They emphasize Russia's imperial intentions and its denial of the Ukrainian nation. The irony is that Russia's aggression is most felt in those areas with large majorities of people who speak Russian as their home language. The cities like Mariupol, in ruins, the mass graves, the multitudes of victims from events like the flooding of the Khakhovka dam. Many, many of those dead and displaced lived and loved in the Russian language.

[00:16:20] **Dr Natalia Kudriavtseva:** I would say that there are external as well as internal misconceptions about the language situation in Ukraine. First of all, Ukrainian speakers versus Russian speakers. That is the view of Ukrainian speakers as sort of opposed to Russian speakers and vice versa. It's probably the most widespread and uncritically perceived views circulating outside of Ukraine. And all of the misconceptions that follow, such as the language divide between Ukrainian speakers and Russian speakers. All the linguistically conditioned political preferences, such as Ukrainian speakers being more west oriented and Russian speakers being pro Russian. This is all nonsense, of course. Sheer trash invented by Russian propaganda to claim sovereignty over those people in Ukraine who speak Russian as their first language. Among the internal myths it's the idea that bilingualism leads to Russification. Well, it was true

under the Soviet regime whose aim was to displace Ukrainian from use. But since independence and more prominently since the Euromaidan, it is Ukrainian that is added to the already possessed proficiency in Russian.

[00:17:45] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Russian propaganda has long promoted the idea that the population in the Donbas region is Russian speaking, and that by default, their political views align with the Russian state. But this is not the case. Iryna Skubii.

[00:18:05] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** Basically, all of this language issue about this region is also constructed by a Russian ideology. And initially, this, region was populated by Ukrainian speaking population. Most of them were living in a rural area, which was a part of Russian empire back then, and they speak Ukrainian or surzhyk, local version of Ukrainian. This situation started changing only, when those regions became industrialized in the 2nd part of 19th century, when, those peasants and, other workers would come to these big industrial plants and project mines, and they would start to work in these urban areas, first all Russian census of 1897 illustrates that majority of population continue to be claiming themselves as Ukrainian, and Ukrainian would be

their primary language, and, only speakers of Russian would be representing majority in the cities. Basically, it's, when we look at the history of how this language got developed in this region, it comes specifically from this misconception that this region was mostly Russian while in fact, it was Ukrainian speaking initially.

[00:19:31] **Dr Natalia Kudriavtseva:** I find of extreme importance the findings of recent sociolinguistic research, which shows that the so called Russian speakers of the Donbas, are in fact passive bilinguals. This means that while they speak Russian, they also easily understand Ukrainian. This explains the phenomenon of non

accommodating or receptive bilingualism in Ukraine, where you you can see two people communicating, one in Ukrainian and the other one in Russian and understanding each other pretty well. This is also supported by my own co-authered research, where we find more than fifty percent of Ukrainian Russian bilinguals in the Donbas. And those are active bilinguals, meaning that they actually speak both languages. So I would say that Ukraine's Russian speakers are in fact L1 Russian speakers, Which means that

Russian is their first language, L1. While they also have Ukrainian as a second language, and positing the speakers as Russian monolinguals would be an ideological manipulation. This war is as much about territories as it is about identity. For us, Ukrainians, this war is about fighting for who we are, for who we want to be. And in this fight, language, the Ukrainian language, comes as one of the things that we fight for and that we fight with. I often hear in my interviews with people who are now switching to Ukrainian this perception of language as a weapon, and language is an intellectual

weapon. We can support our defenders in the trenches by speaking Ukrainian here. And this perception is captured not only in ethnographic research like mine, but also even in mass media.

[00:21:45] **Dr Natalia Kudriavtseva:** I remember the title of one of the first articles that came out shortly after the start of the full-scale war. It was in the New York Times, and it said, for Russian speaking Ukrainians, language clubs offer way to defy invaders. And that's exactly how many people feel about it now. The ideology of language as linked to identity has always been prominent in Ukraine. But, and this should be stressed, only as far as it concerns the Ukrainian language. Russian has been viewed as a habitual

means of communication. And research shows a relative stability in these language attitudes all the time. While Russian has been valued as a communication tool the importance of Ukrainian is both communicative and symbolic. As Laada Bilaniuk writes, it has been well accepted that many people's deeds show that being Russophone often goes along with being a Ukrainian patriot. New forms of national identification emerged after the Euromaidan, and the emerging identity is hybrid, and it is chosen, which means that people reject Russia without also rejecting the Russian language. While they may also learn and speak Ukrainian to choose their belonging to Ukraine. The war has been significantly politicizing language choice, and the beginning of Russian aggression in 2014 gave rise to the idea that speaking Russian can undermine Ukraine's peace and security, while speaking Ukrainian is a sign of belonging to

Ukraine. But there has always also been a counter view, a counter ideology, which sees this choice as transparent and politically neutral.

[00:23:47] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Sociolinguist Natalia Kudriavtseva. So what is the Ukrainian language? Ukrainian is an East Slavonic or Slavic language with roots in the lands that would later become Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, dating back millennia. Ukrainian and Russian still share a lot of basic vocabulary, but not enough to be considered dialects of a single language. Depending on the source and how we calculate it, the lexicons or vocabularies of Russian and Ukrainian differ by about 38%. The remaining 62% Of the Ukrainian lexicon includes words with varying degrees of similarity to Russian. For example, the English word guest is 'hist' in Ukrainian.

[00:24:44] **Volodymyr:** 'Hist'.

[00:24:45] **Amina Mindelis:** 'Hist'.

[00:24:48] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** And 'gost' in Russian. [00:24:49] **Volodymyr:** 'Gost'.

[00:24:50] **Amina Mindelis:** 'Gost'.

[00:24:51] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Here is another example. Goodbye is 'do pobachennia' in

Ukrainian?

[00:24:57] **Amina Mindelis:** 'Do pobachennia'. [00:24:57] **Volodymyr:** 'Do pobachennia'. [00:25:00] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** And 'do svidaniya'. [00:25:02] **Volodymyr:** 'Do svidaniya'.

[00:25:03] **Amina Mindelis:** 'Do svidaniya'. [00:25:04] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** In Russian.

[00:25:06] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** I should add that the Russian language spoken in Ukraine doesn't sound the same as Russian spoken in Russia. Like many languages, Ukrainian has quite a few dialects, and differences can be heard particularly in the south eastern, south western, and northern parts of Ukraine. There are even dialects in the Carpathian mountains, on the border with Romania, which a typical person in Kyiv would have a very hard time understanding. The beginnings of the modern Ukrainian language can be traced to the poem 'Eneida' which was composed by Ivan Kotlarevsky in 1798. This was the first written work based on the spoken Ukrainian language. During the 19th and

early 20th centuries, Ukrainian developed further, forming the basis of what we now call

Standard Literary Ukrainian.

[00:26:19] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** Iryna Skubii. Another prominent writer of that period was Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko, who is, known as basically, founder of modern Ukrainian prose. Like many writers at the time, he wrote both Ukrainian and Russian, but, thanks to him, literature Ukrainian literature became seen as serious literature. So thanks to him, we have two new genres, satirical realist novel, and sentimental realist novel. So their contribution is important not only because they published something or wrote, but because they they saw the importance of collecting of Ukrainian folklore and traditions, and as they publish studies and make it available to us as scholars. So there were a lot of developments, with making local language used as a literary canon.

[00:27:17] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Taras Shevchenko was the major figure in the development of the Ukrainian language and literature. He was born 'kripak', a serf. He was a poet, a writer, an artist, an important political figure, and a symbol of modern Ukrainian nationhood.

[00:27:49] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** We see Shevchenko quite a lot in different images of current war in media, in posters, in different banners, and Shevchenko really became a very, important writer who helps us to understand the challenges of writing in Ukrainian, living in this imperial space, and he introduced all of these critical discussions in his poems and other novels. Certainly, one of the most influential work, that he published was his Kobzar. This work appeared in 1840 as a collection of poems, where Shevchenko was very critical of the social regime of Russian imperial society, because of that, it certainly became one of the most influential book in the history of Ukraine and literature in general. And, no wonder that immediately after its publication, this work was, banned and censored. Not only it was critical to the Russian imperial regime, but because critics claim that Ukrainian language here is not good enough, it's just a hybrid dialect of Russian, or it's a language of poor people. Indeed, the majority of population who speak Ukrainians at times, they would really be very poor people. They would be serfs officially until 1861. The majority of them will speak Ukrainian in their daily life.

[00:29:30] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** What is known as the language question in Ukraine goes back centuries. It's deeply rooted in the history of old empires and Ukraine's position as the borderland between the west and the east. Ukraine has been subjected to centuries of enforced Russification. This has meant the systematic persecution of Ukrainian

culture and language. In the Russian empire, Ukrainian was referred to as 'Malorusskiy',

meaning 'Little Russian'. It was viewed as something less, not a language in its own right. In the second half of the 19th century, Russia imposed several language policies on what is now Ukraine. The main aim was to stem the growth of the Ukrainian language, and more importantly, to suppress Ukrainian identity and the idea of Ukraine as a nation.

[00:30:31] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** Again, it seems like 19th century is one of the most important period when we would see the rules of many of these challenges that Ukraine as a modern independent state is facing now. Basically, here, we see that one of the most important and catastrophic events for Ukrainian culture was the introduction of Valuev Circular of 1863 when according to these regulations, was not allowed to publish any educational, academic, or religious literature, only fiction literature or prose would

be allowed. And, certainly, it was very, challenging for the development of Ukrainian movement, which had just started to develop, and it was very crucial period for, Ukrainian, literature and culture, and then it was just kind of abruptly stopped. And then another even more drastic, measures in 1876 was introduced, The Ems Decree. When all Ukrainian publications were banned and even was prohibited to bring them from abroad. So, like any kinds of literature in Ukraine was forbidden. And, certainly, it impacted the use of Ukrainian in public spaces, in printing, in theatre. And formally, this decree was in action until the beginning of 20th century, when there was first Russian revolution of 1905. Only during this period, these restrictions were lifted thanks to the demands of workers and, intelligentsia. So, it was really a very decisive period for development of Ukrainian language. Because of these restrictions, many of Ukrainian writers would immigrate abroad or move to Ukrainian lands that belonged to Austro- Hungarian empire, Galicia, for instance, to Lviv, and there they would find new connections with another scholars and writers in this part of Ukrainian lands, or they would translate their works into other European languages and publish them abroad. So at some point, this allowed Ukrainian writers to find new ways to present themselves

and their works to bigger audiences in Ukraine and abroad.

[00:33:10] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** The beginning of the 20th century was a turbulent time for Ukraine. So, Iryna, tell us the historical narrative surrounding Ukraine's struggle for independence during that time.

[00:33:23] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** Unfortunately, we see that Ukraine's struggle for independence that we are just facing now, was not new. And in history, we have very similar and also critical moments after the collapse of Russian empire when Ukraine started its struggle for independence in 1917, immediately following the abdication of Russian emperor of his throne, the leaders of Ukrainian political movement, and some of them again were prominent Ukrainian writers and historians like Mykhailo Hrushevsky, Borys Grinchenko, they they decided that it is time to create Ukrainian

People's Republic, which would be a part of democratic federation with Russia, but then Bolsheviks took Power in October 1917 and started war against Kyiv government, and Ukraine has to fight for its right to be independent, which Ukraine proclaimed in January

1918. Also, what's important is that similarly in Western Ukrainian lands in 1918 also were Proclaimed Western Ukrainian People's Republic. We have these 2 People's Republics that representing Ukrainian people, but they still have to face several years of continuing warfare with different foreign countries who wouldn't allow them to become independent. It was until 1921 when, the majority of Ukrainian lands were incorporated into Soviet Ukrainian Republic, and a national revolution was defeated. And Western Ukrainian People's Republic was also incorporated into different countries and divided between Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia.

[00:35:37] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** During the 1920s, Ukrainian culture and language experienced a period of official reprieve. Ukrainian was allowed to flourish. There was an increase in Ukrainian language publishing and in the number of Ukrainian language

schools. Ukrainian became not only the language of the theater, but also of state affairs.

[00:35:58] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** We see that socialist government in Ukraine and in Moscow, they, at some point in early twenties, they decided that it is important to develop different nations and their cultures under the communist umbrella, and this would allow them to create the proper union of nations, and that's why in the early twenties, they introduced the politics named 'korenization', which would allow developing of different cultures of national republics. It indeed looks progressive. It had

already achieved significant results in promoting Ukrainian language, in particular, in the cities as a result of Ukrainization, the number of Ukrainian speaking population grew, and among some other results were the growing number of Ukrainian language publications, different journals, newspapers, different kinds of printed media. And, certainly, it was a big development compared to those censorships and restrictions that

were just, lifted in the beginning of the 20th century. We would see a bigger number of Ukrainian publications, books, and Ukrainian writers finally have this opportunity to write freely what they basically want just for a couple of years.

[00:37:22] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** But this was short lived. And what followed was a much longer period of persecution of everything Ukrainian. In what's known as the 'Executed Renaissance', Ukraine's educated elites were arrested in large numbers, sent to the Gulag, and many killed. The Soviet era started with an all too brief period of Ukrainianization. What quickly followed was a brutal suppression of the Ukrainian culture and identity. Iryna, can you tell us a bit more about this dark chapter?

[00:38:06] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** Already, by the end of 1920s, we see the first repressions against Ukrainian writers and poets and scholars. In the 1930s, we see that these repressions, became so massive that see in a couple of years executions of Ukrainian literally figures. Among them were prominent Ukrainian writer, Mykola Khvyliovy, who shoots himself in a protest against this politics, many others faced heavy and strict criminal charges. They were physically executed, prosecuted, and sent to labor camps, Gulag, or sentenced for dozen of years. Also, I would like to say that, the fate of, Mykola Zerov, a prominent Ukrainian poet and writer of the 1920s, whose name was taken for the Centre of Ukrainian Studies at Monash University and now gives a name to the newly established position in Ukrainian Studies at the University of Melbourne was also very typical. In the 1920s, he was very active in Ukrainian literary circles, and he taught at universities. But then in the early thirties, his literal activity was officially restricted, so he, as a writer, was not allowed to write anymore. He got fired. And and then in a year, he was convicted again, of so-called contra-revolutionary terrorist national organization. He was sentenced to concentration camps, for 10 years and executed in a year. And

this is just one story or one biography, but there are many of similar stories of Ukrainian writers.

[00:40:11] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** In 1932-33, The Soviet government left millions of Ukrainians to starve in a mass famine known as the Holodomor, which translates as killing by hunger.

[00:40:24] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** We will see lots of connections between repressions against Ukrainian writers, against Ukrainian language, and, the Holodomor, these

events took place at the same time. Those repressions started in the beginning of

1930s. And at the same time, Soviet authorities started implementing politics of collectivization of agriculture in Ukraine and other republics, but in Ukraine, this politics was the most intense, the most repressive, the most strict, and the confiscation of grain also was so massive that people didn't have left any food or grain, and it resulted in the mass famine of 1932-1933, known in Ukraine as the Holodomor or killing by hunger. So basically, it was a man-made famine that was aimed to suppress the activity of Ukrainian peasants that go against forced collectivization of agriculture. Basically, we see that those processes of repressions against writers and culture they go together with repressions against Ukrainian peasants. Being a historian, I could say that the history of Holodomor also significantly impacted the language situation of Ukrainian Republic. People were trying to escape the starving regions, when they were trying to find anything edible or try to migrate to bigger cities, they would go to eastern part of Ukraine to these Russified cities, to Donetsk and Luhansk regions in particular. So in

this situation, their survival became their main priority, and, language issue was merged with the idea about their survival. Because of this, we see the growing number of population of these industrial cities while Ukrainian rural areas became kind of deserts for some time because around 4,000,000 people were killed by this famine. The estimations, this Soviet famine of 1932-33 had the most devastating impact on the population of Ukraine.

[00:42:58] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Shortly after Russia's full Scale invasion began in early

2022. Stories started to appear in the media about Ukrainian people giving up using Russian at home, in the workplace and switched it to Ukrainian only. These people who grew up speaking Russian, speaking Russian with their parents, spouses and children were now making the choice to convert to Ukrainian. An article from The Guardian at the time even referred to a generational shift, and suggested that Russian would

disappear from Ukraine in 10 years. What a lot of these news stories failed to mention is that this trend of linguistic conversion started well before February 2022. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many people, including some with no claim to Ukrainian heritage at all, have been gradually shifting from speaking Russian to Ukrainian.

Several key events spurred people in Ukraine to abandon their Russian and take up Ukrainian. The Orange Revolution of 2004, the Euromaidan in 2013-2014, Russia's invasion of the east of Ukraine, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Once again, Natalia Kudriavtseva.

[00:44:18] **Dr Natalia Kudriavtseva:** Last year's full scale vision has significantly intensified the linguistic conversion. However, this process did not start last year. A massive transition from Russian to Ukrainian was spread by the Euromaidan and the beginning of Russian aggression in 2014 and was noticeable even before those events. As before, the living motivation for linguistic conversion has been the perception of language as an identity marker. That is people who decide to change their everyday language practice do so because they feel that they belong to Ukraine. This identity motivation may take various forms. The most common is national identification. There is also ethno-linguistic, older perception of Ukrainian as one's cultural heritage, verbalized by some of my interviewees as "we bring back whatever is ours", meaning that Ukrainian is the language of Ukrainian people. While identification is most prominent, there has also been another quite tangible motivation related to the perception of Ukrainian as a valuable part of one's cultural capital and a useful resource. This correlates with the view of language as a means of communication. And what I found to be most effective in this linguistic conversion is when both the motivations, the view of language as an identity marker and as a communication tool work for an individual language transition. It is the combination of various reasons to speak Ukrainian that is likely to secure a lasting shift.

[00:46:08] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** There is another 'language' already mentioned by our guests. It's called surzhyk, and it's the first language for many people all over Ukraine. It exists largely in spoken form. Surzhyk is intertwined with the history of Ukraine. Centuries of Russification and language ideologies promoting standard or pure language. It has long been stigmatized and its speakers viewed as poorly educated and lacking sophistication. Surzhyk is a mixed language and comes in many shapes and forms, cutting across generations and social classes of that linguistic middle ground between Ukrainian and Russian. Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish what is a local dialect and what is surzhyk. The type of surzhyk commonly heard today is 'transitional' or 'neo-surzhyk' as Natalia explains.

[00:47:17] **Dr Natalia Kudriavtseva:** This is namely the kind of surzhyk that we are having now. And in the current transition from Russian to Ukrainian, this 'neo-surzhyk' appears to be an unavoidable stage in mastering the Ukrainian language. "You cannot avoid surzhyk. It is a transitional stage", says of one of my interviewees from Mykolaiv

who fully switched to Ukrainian last year. And this re-evaluation of surzhyk as related to the linguistic conversion has encouraged a more positive perspective on it. It is now perceived to be better, better than Russian. "It is better to speak surzhyk that not to speak at all", says one of the volunteer teachers from the nationwide network for Ukrainian language courses. Well, surzhyk is also a weapon. "With surzhyk we fought

off the Russians", said my interviewees about the de-occupied parts of Chernihiv Oblast in the north of Ukraine.

[00:48:15] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** Due to the war, the language issue became even more radicalized. In my opinion, this also resulted in larger support of and acceptance of those Ukrainian speakers like me and others who have been speaking in their daily life in surzhyk, which, previously, some people would try difficult to understand as a part of normative Ukrainian language. We have this discussion about the usability of different languages and surzhyk in particular.

[00:48:54] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** It's one thing to reject the Russian language, but many Ukrainians are going beyond that and are rejecting all things Russian and all things Soviet. Monuments to Pushkin, for example, are disappearing from town squares across Ukraine. Streets and cities have been renamed.

[00:49:13] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** We saw the changes in, rejection of some Russianness in cultures in post Soviet republics already in the early 1990s. And in Ukraine, the most significant changes in this area we we saw when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and during this first attempt of aggression against Ukraine, we saw that Ukrainian public society and Ukrainian state started to really understand the importance of de- imperialization of Ukrainian public space. We we saw very active discussions about the legacies of Russian imperial past, about Soviet heritage, in particular, that was about renaming of streets and the cities and some public spaces. And I remember discussions that Ukraine were facing, when trying to claim its own right to name Kyiv as a capital of Ukraine in Ukrainian transliteration, but not in Russian. For Ukrainian society, this was a decisive moment that we have to claim our cities and their names. Since the full scale war of Russia against Ukraine those discussions became much more intense and much more supported by the majority of Ukrainian society. They have faced all of these challenges in their everyday life, with this missile attacks and bombardments, this

willingness to disengage with Russian past and these legacies of great so called great

Russian culture became really popular among many of Ukrainians.

[00:51:02] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Iryna Skubii. Amina and Volodymyr are 2 young

Ukrainians who, due to the war, are now studying at university here in Australia. I asked them about their own language backgrounds back in Ukraine and how they see the popular conversion to speaking Ukrainian.

[00:51:26] **Amina Mindelis:** So I'm originally from Odesa. I was born there and lived there for 19 years of my life. It's very multicultural, and when people are saying that, yeah, there are a lot of nationalities in Ukraine, I always think, first and foremost, about my city. And it's very interesting, like, growing up seeing a lot of people with absolutely different backgrounds, but at the same time, we're all very connected because we are still considering us as Ukrainians.

[00:51:54] **Volodymyr:** All my life, I was living in Kyiv. I was born there and lived there till 2022. I wouldn't say that Kyiv is so multicultural, or at least I didn't notice that.

[00:52:06] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** Well, when you were, a child and then growing up, what language or languages were spoken in your family, Volodymyr?

[00:52:15] **Volodymyr:** When I was a kid, it didn't really matter to me which language I speak. I mean, probably I couldn't even tell the difference what's Russian what's Ukrainian, but I spoke mostly Russian, maybe till year 2014 when I finally understood the major difference and why some people are so insistent on speaking Ukrainian only, and that may be the time when I started speaking Ukrainian on my daily basis. But, yeah, most of my family, they spoken Russian.

[00:52:49] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** And what about, at the moment, what languages are spoken in your family, immediate family especially?

[00:52:55] **Volodymyr:** Right now, I'm speaking mostly Ukrainians, so with all my family, wit my mom, my dad, and, my grandmas. Sometimes you use, like, couple of Russian sentences, But, yeah, mostly it's Ukrainian language, and, I'm speaking Ukrainian with all of my friends who also speak it. But I continue speaking Russian with friends who

also still speak this language because it's just hard to, you know, operate on different languages with the same person.

[00:53:25] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** And what about you, Amina? What languages were spoken in the family when you were growing up?

[00:53:30] **Amina Mindelis:** So since I was born, everyone was speaking Russian language and never any of my relatives or even friends were speaking Ukrainian. So Odesa is very Russian speaking city, like, even if you're walking around and, you hear Ukrainian, it was kind of a surprise. So growing up, only Russian, and I did not speak Ukrainian until I went to the school to 1st grade. And I remember I was so confused because some letters are different, and it was kind of Russian, but it's not. But since then, since school, I learned Ukrainian, and all subjects were in Ukrainian. And I'm a fan of Ukrainian language. It's so beautiful. And some days I would just speak Ukrainian all day to my family, and they would reply to me in Russian. But yes, growing up, no one spoke Ukrainian. My grandma, she spoke surzhyk. It's not Ukrainian because it's kind of a mix, and we don't speak Ukrainian in our everyday life. But at the same time, it's really important to mention that I know people who transitioned to Ukrainian, they were speaking Russian to me all life since I knew them, and now they switched. They speak only Ukrainian. And every time I talk to them or message with them, I cannot reply in Russian. I don't feel like it's right. And I quickly assimilate and I start speaking in Ukrainian because it's not hard hard for me. I can imagine a person who's speaking Russian for 20 years, and it takes courage and really an effort to switch a language. So every time someone speaks in Ukrainian to me, I switch the language.

[00:55:17] **Volodymyr:** It was a bit shocking to me when I, like, speak to one of my friends who all their life spoke in Russian, and suddenly they replied to me with Ukrainian. I continued conversation with them in Ukrainian, but it was just strange to see someone who you know to be a Russian speaker suddenly to reply in in Ukrainian it's just like some switch in personality, and you see the person in, like, slightly different

light.

[00:55:44] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** You've already started, answering my next question. How do you feel about more and more Ukrainians whose first language is Russian shifting from speaking Russian to Ukrainian.

[00:55:55] **Volodymyr:** I was feeling strongly positive about Ukrainians doing that, but I

don't blame those who can't make such a transition.

[00:56:04] **Amina Mindelis:** Yeah. I absolutely agree with that. But personally me, I decided not to switch to Ukrainian because Russian is my first language, and it feels like home, unfortunately speaking Russian and not Ukrainian. And I believe that

transitioning to another language, it's something that should be made organically, you know? It's like when you start believing in God or you're falling in love, you just need to feel like you're willing to do that. It can't be forced. Because otherwise, there is nothing good about it.

[00:56:38] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** What do you see as the future of Ukrainian and Russian languages in Ukraine?

[00:56:43] **Volodymyr:** I can imagine that most of Ukrainians would make a transition to Ukrainian. But there definitely will be some speakers who still speak Russian. Maybe, there will be some conflicts, like, we can see already that in customer service clients are just not happy with workers who are applying them to Russian. But overall, I would say that at homes or on the streets, like, between, people there still can be heard Russian language, but in shops or in workplace, so there probably will mostly be Ukrainian.

[00:57:26] **Amina Mindelis:** I agree that Ukrainian will be everywhere, like in shops, in schools, universities, at workplace, And it kinda makes sense, but if we're talking about cities like Odesa, Kharkiv, I cannot imagine a full transition into Ukrainian. So I believe they will just exist together, organically. I hope so.

[00:57:53] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** So what does Ukraine's linguistic future look and sound like? What direction will the Ukrainian language take? And what about Russian as the war rages on? And what happens after the war?

[00:58:07] **Dr Natalia Kudriavtseva:** I think that Ukrainian will definitely dominate in independent Ukraine, both in public domains and in private communication. Russian is likely to be marginalized to a language of limited use. And I also hope that there will be a reconceptualization, a rebranding of Ukraine as a multilingual country, which means

more attention paid to Ukraine's minority languages, especially to those that are endangered. From what I've seen in my own research, there is a demand for revitalization of Crimean Tartar in Ukraine, because I had an interview with our Crimean Tartar, who is now relocated to Odesa. And there is also a very clear understanding among Ukrainian people of the need to learn foreign languages, and not only English, Polish, Lithuanian, Bulgarian, and even Chinese. So my prospect would definitely be of a multilingual Ukraine and multilingual Ukrainian mission.

[00:59:10] **Dr Iryna Skubii:** It's absolutely no doubt that because of the current situation and current challenges the language environment of Ukraine and also what's important, also in diaspora communities abroad, they have witnessed significant linguistic changes and transformations. People have done different personal decisions or still in the process of making them or try to understand what they should do with their language, but no doubt that it will undergo crucial transformation, and Russia's aggression has made significant challenges for Ukrainian culture, and it's still difficult to predict, the extent of this and scale of this changes. The society will need to cope with the consequent language trauma and its impact for a long time. And my hope that in this situation, given Ukraine's experience dealing with such difficult past and having different ethnicities and nationalities, a part of Ukrainian society for a long time, there will be a way to provide opportunity for development of different languages, but still Ukrainian would have the opportunity to really embrace itself.

[01:00:45] **Dr Olga Maxwell:** That's it for this episode of the secret life of language. Special thanks to our guests, sociolinguist Dr Natalia Kudriavtseva and historian, Dr Iryna Skubii, who, by the way, joins the University of Melbourne as a Mykola Zerov Fellow in Ukrainian Studies in the spring of 2024. Thanks also to Volodymyr, Amina Mendelis, and Yuliia Manetska for contributing their voices and conversations. Producers for this episode were Eric van Bemmel and Kelvin Param of Profactual, Gavin Nebauer, and me, Olga Maxwell. The Secret Life of Language is recorded and mixed at Horwood Recording Studios by Gavin Nebauer, and is a podcast from the

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