PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF ANALYZING UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE ISSUES THROUGH THE POSTCOLONIAL LENS

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REFLECTIONS ON POSTCOLONIAL LINGUISTICS AND PERSPECTIVES FOR THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN UKRAINE

Abstract

Background. *Debates about postcolonialism and related terms, concepts and ideologies such as decommunization and de-Russification shape current societal, political and academic discourses in Ukraine.*

Contribution to the research field. *With a focus on academic discourses, this article deals with postcolonial linguistics with regard to the language situation in Ukraine. Postcolonial linguistics is understood as an umbrella term for "language in postcolonial contexts" and "postcolonial approaches to the study of language" (Levisen & Sippola, 2019, p. 1) as well as (post)colonialistic practices in multilingual language situations. Against the background of this broad understanding of postcolonial linguistics, this paper focuses on language situation and language policy in connection with language ideologies.*

Purpose. *The aim of this article is first to reflect on concepts of postcolonial linguistics and then to discuss the extent to which the language situation in*

Ukraine can be analyzed as a postcolonial language situation. The article also aims to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the postcolonial lens for analyzing the language situation in Ukraine and what the case of Ukraine contributes to postcolonial linguistics. To this end, Ukraine's language situation is analyzed in more detail on the basis of two case studies. Herein the article deals with the Soviet language policy and with decommunization as well as de-Russification in Ukraine since the beginning of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Methods. *The methodical approach and the material basis are literature-based.*

Results. *The article reveals numerous aspects of the language situation from a postcolonialistic perspective and also demonstrates that the postcolonial lens should only be one approach to analysis among others, as developments in language policy and language ideology are multifaceted.*

Keywords: postcolonial linguistics, language ideologies, language policy, language situation, Ukraine, Soviet Union.

1. Introduction

Current societal, political, and academic discourses in Ukraine are characterized by intense debates about 'postcolonialism'. Key terms, concepts and ideologies of these debates are decommunization, decolonization, and de-Russification, which are inextricable linked to linguistic processes and practices (Kobchenko, 2023). A visible example is dealing with toponymy in the various phases of decommunization. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, tendencies of decommunization can be observed in different forms and varying approaches (Azniuk, 2024; Demska & Levchuk, 2020; Kravchenko & Petriv, 2022). The 2015 decommunization laws in Ukraine are a visible sign of the intensification of the decommunization. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, decommunization and de-Russification have intensified enormously. Since decommunization and de-Russification are often used in societal discourses in connection with decolonization, the link between the analysis of the language situation in Ukraine and postcolonial linguistics is obvious.

2. Theoretical background: Postcolonial linguistics as an umbrella term

Postcolonial linguistics or postcolonial language studies (Warnke, 2017) are closely linked to attitudes and expectations, as I. Warnke points out: "'Ko-

lonialismus' und 'Postkolonialismus' sind mithin mit Geschichte, Einstellungen und daraus abgeleiteten Erwartungen aufgeladene Begriffe, die deshalb nicht zuletzt nur in spezifisch regulierten Sprachspielen verwendbar sind. Wenn sich Linguistik mit Kolonialismus oder postkolonialer Theorie befasst, betritt sie folglich ein Feld vorgeprägter Einstellungen und Erwartungen." [1] (Warnke, 2017, p. 97). Attitudes and expectations are all the more important when it comes to spaces that are not part of classic European overseas colonialism, as in the case of Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Soviet Union. Accordingly, attitudes and expectations also shape societal debates when the question of whether a post-Soviet state such as Ukraine is a postcolonial state is discussed in principle (Szeptycki, 2011), see the next section in connection with Ukraine's language situation).

We understand postcolonial linguistics as an umbrella term for various research strands. According to Levisen & Sippola (2019, p. 1 – the editors of the *Journal of Postcolonial Linguistics*), we define postcolonial linguistics as the analysis of "language in postcolonial contexts" and "postcolonial approaches to the study of language". Since the latter also includes "to engage critically with the way in which we do linguistics" (Levisen & Sippola, 2019, p. 1), the difference in relation to the spatial spectrum of postcolonial linguistics becomes clear here again. This is because questions that typically fall within the field of investigation of postcolonial studies, such as the global North and global South, do not play a role in relation to the question of postcolonialism in Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe, as part of "Northern linguistics", has had a decisive influence on it – just think of the Prague School and Soviet linguistics as one example among many. This makes it clear once again that postcolonial linguistics, with its focus on classical overseas colonialism, pursues different questions than linguistics, which is dedicated to the question of the extent to which, for example, post-Soviet states should be treated as postcolonial language situations. [2] Accordingly, in this article the understanding of postcolonial linguistics is extended to include another re-

[1] "'Colonialism' and 'postcolonialism' are thus linked to history, attitudes and the expectations derived from them, which is why they can only be used in specifically regulated language games. When linguistics deals with colonialism or postcolonial theory, it therefore enters a field of predetermined attitudes and expectations."

[2] In contrast to linguistics, literary and cultural studies have a long tradition in postcolonial studies. The connection with post-Soviet postcolonial studies is also discussed here, see Albrecht 2019.

search strand in addition to the two mentioned above. It is about (post)colonialistic practices in multilingual [3] language situations, which include, for example, language bans, hierarchization of languages in multilingual states or assimilation policies. Against the background of this broad understanding of postcolonial linguistics, this article analyzes the language situation in Ukraine.

I. Warnke (2017, pp. 98–99) discusses the disciplinary history of postcolonial linguistics and highlights the early relevant works of L. J. Calvet (1974) and J. Errington (2001, 2009). Warnke points out that postcolonial language studies have only emerged in recent years "als forschungsorientierte Teildisziplin der Sprachwissenschaft" [4] (Warnke, 2017, p. 98) and that "in interdisciplinary postcolonial discourse, linguistics occupies at best a marginal position" (Warnke, 2019, p. 44). Thus, Warnke (2017, pp. 98–99) points out that key works of postcolonial studies include many disciplines, but often do not include linguistics and that linguistics itself has shown a lack of interest in (post)colonial realities. In addition to these tendencies of discipline-specific developments mentioned by Warnke, it should be added that linguistic disciplines have nevertheless long been engaged with (post)coloniality or (post) colonial perspectives on language situations in many other subdisciplines of linguistics, such as: sociolinguistics (language policy, multilingualism, attitudes, identities), contact linguistics (mixed languages, pidgin and creole languages), conflict linguistics (ethno-linguistic conflicts), discourse linguistics, and others (cf. also the interdisciplinary introduction to language and colonialism by Stolz et al., 2016 and to language and (post)colonialism by Kellermeier-Rehbein et al., 2018).

In addition, the research field of language ideologies should be specifically emphasized here, because "Postcolonial linguistics is about language ideologies that have shaped the field itself." (Warnke, 2019, p. 45). The fact that language ideologies are the subject of several of the above-mentioned subdis-

[3] According to Haarmann's concept (1999, pp. 845–846), multilingualism is a multifaceted term: it can refer to the number of languages, the use of languages or language proficiency. In this article, we understand multilingual and multilingualism in the sense of the multitude of languages or as language diversity including the state language and the languages of the minorities. Accordingly, we understand multilingual as a generic term encompassing bilingual, plurilingual, and multilingual situations and we make "no distinction between bilingualism and multilingualism as separate concepts" (Romaine, 2019, p. 257).

[4] "as a research-oriented sub-discipline of linguistics"

ciplines of linguistics and cannot be assigned to just one also speaks in favor of emphasizing this field of research. This article takes a look at postcolonial linguistics and the language situation in Ukraine, focusing in particular on language ideologies in connection with language policy and the language situation. [5] The study is based on Kroskrity's definition of language ideologies "as beliefs, feelings, and conceptions about language structure and use which often index the political economic interests of individual speakers, ethnic and other interest groups, and nation states" (Kroskrity, 2010, p. 192).

The fact that "in interdisciplinary postcolonial discourse, linguistics occupies at best a marginal position" (Warnke, 2019, p. 44) is one thing; the other is that Eastern Europe is generally not dealt with in basic works on postcolonial linguistics, as these tend to focus on language situations that belong to the classic colonial spaces, as already mentioned above. [6] With regard to Eastern Europe and linguistics, this raises the fundamental question of a postcolonial approach, which we will critically examine in relation to the language situation in Ukraine in the following. In line with the broad understanding of postcolonial linguistics outlined above, we consider Ukraine's language situation from several perspectives: from languages in postcolonial contexts and Ukraine's language situation from a postcolonial research perspective as well as postcolonialistic practices in Ukraine's language situation.

Thus, the aim of this article is to reflect on concepts of postcolonial linguistics and to discuss the extent to which the language situation in Ukraine can be analyzed as a postcolonial language situation. The article also aims to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the postcolonial lens for analyzing the language situation in Ukraine. Against the background of a broad conception of postcolonial linguistics (section 2), the article examines in section 3 the question of the extent to which the language situation in Ukraine can be analyzed as a postcolonial language situation and which postcolonial practices can be identified. It goes on to examine this with regard to Soviet language policy (4.1) and in relation to decommunization and de-Russification in to-

[5] The analyses on language ideologies were conducted as part of a project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from 2022 to 2025 and carried out by Monika Wingender and Liudmyla Pidkuimukha at Justus Liebig University Giessen (title of the project: "Comparison of language ideologies in the Soviet Union and the present-day Russian Federation – continuity, ruptures, reorientations", project number 492769567).

[6] Cf. in contrast the development of post-Soviet post-colonial studies in literary and cultural studies, see footnote 2.

day's Ukraine during the war (4.2). After this sociolinguistic analysis, the article discusses in the conclusions (5.) what advantages and disadvantages the postcolonial lens has for the analysis of the language situation in Ukraine and what insights the case of Ukraine provides for postcolonial linguistics. The focus of the article is on the language situation and language policy in connection with language ideologies. The methodological approach and the material basis are literature-based.

3. Postcolonial perspectives on the language situation in Ukraine

In considering the two components of the term 'postcolonial linguistics', we begin with 'postcolonial' before turning to the linguistic aspects. In his 2011 article, A. Szeptycki poses the question "Ukraine as a Postcolonial State?" and concludes at the end of his analysis: "Although not a typical postcolonial state, Ukraine does exhibit many of its features. Dependency on the former metropole can be seen most strongly in the social sphere, culture and the economy, but it is also visible in internal politics and in the country's external affairs." (Szeptycki, 2011, p. 28). Szeptycki published his article in 2011, and the international relations have changed since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, both politically and economically. The discussion and answer to the question of the meaning of '(post)colonial' are often conducted from the perspective of political science, history and economics, which is obvious given the characteristics of colonialism (from a linguistic point of view, see Kobchenko, 2023, pp. 14-16; furthermore Fedorova & Protassova, 2024, p. 1; from a cultural studies perspective Schmid, 2023). A. Pavlenko names various positions in the discussion about the "applicability of the term ′postcolonial′ to the post-Soviet situation" (Pavlenko, 2008a, p. 303). Accordingly, Masenko (2004), for example, affirms the applicability of the term, Laitin (1998) points to differences between the republics such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan, while others "argue that as a whole the Soviet Union was neither fully colonial nor federal, rather it was a multiethnic state that contained elements of several systems" (Pavlenko, 2008a, p. 303). Snyder recently described the war in Ukraine as a colonial war (Snyder, 2022). With regard to current decolonization debates in Ukraine, it is obvious that these are to be understood as a counter-movement to Russia's imperial propaganda: "As Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, and his supporters openly employ imperialistic or colonial narratives to deny Ukraine and Ukrainians their (historical, linguistic, or cultural) autonomy and to justify war, rape, abduction, and genocide, a de-

colonial counter-movement both in real life and in social media discourse is to be expected." (Rabus, 2025, p. 1). In accordance with the linguistic focus of this study, we concentrate below on the second component of postcolonial linguistics, on linguistic perspectives, and address the question of the postcolonial language situation.

I return to the introduction to the *Journal of postcolonial linguistics* (Levisen & Sippola, 2019), which correctly points out that there is a broad spectrum of understanding with regard to 'postcolonial'. While 'postcolonial' in postcolonial studies is about the "colonial matrix of power" (Warnke, 2017), Levisen & Sippola (2019, p. 2) point to further concepts, including the temporal concept of Anchimbe (2018): "I have used the term postcolonial as an era, time-defining concept." (Anchimbe, 2018, p. xiii). And in more detail on p. 60: "However, I will like to clarify how the term 'postcolonial' (i.e. as in postcolonial pragmatics) is used in this work. As stated in the preface, the use of the word 'postcolonial' here is independent of how it is used in postcolonial theory propagated in the work of theorists like Bhabha (1994), Spivak (1988) and by the foundational authors on decolonization such as Fanon (1952) and Said (1979). For the analysis of this book, 'postcolonial' denotes a period marked by changes in political order in hitherto colonized communities."

This article takes up the keyword of the temporal concept and connects it with the hierarchical concept of power relations. It raises the question of the meaning of the prefix -post in postcolonial (also in post-communist, post-socialist, post-Soviet). In the case of Eastern Europe, this includes the period following the collapse of the multilingual empires (Tsarist Russia, Soviet Union). This article therefore looks at the multilingual empires, their collapse and the transformations in the subsequent phases as a temporal framework for corresponding language situations.

Against the background of the previous explanations, this article deals with the language situation in Ukraine under the broader concept of colonialistic perspectives. By 'colonialistic' we mean, as just mentioned, a temporal and hierarchical concept as well as a "ideologische Haltung, die aber nicht an die historische Periode des faktischen Kolonialismus gebunden sein muss, sondern auch vor- und nachgelagert sein kann" [7] (Dewein et al., 2012, p. 243). This

[7] "ideological attitude, which, however, need not be tied to the historical period of de facto colonialism, but can also precede and follow it."

article highlights the following main features of language situations from a postcolonialistic perspective:

- Asymmetries, socially asymmetrical power constellations (Dewein et al., 2012, p. 243), asymmetrical language relations and corresponding language policies
- Power, ideologies of superiority (Levisen & Sippola, 2019, p. 4), exercise of power through language ideologies and language policy
- language empire (Phillipson, 1997) with corresponding ideologies, including the relationship between empire and periphery, hierarchization of languages.

Corresponding characteristics are also emphasized in relation to other language related disciplines, such as translation history: "[…] translation history possesses a decolonial potential as it serves as a lens through which to examine power dynamics, cultural hegemony, and colonial legacies inherent in linguistic exchanges. By interrogating translation practices, uncovering silenced voices, and challenging dominant narratives, translation history can contribute to the decolonization of knowledge and the promotion of diverse perspectives and epistemologies." (Odrekhivska, 2024, p. 6).

Concerning Ukraine, we find corresponding examples with regard to the above-mentioned characteristics in the following developments in the language situation and in the debates surrounding it:

- polarized interpretations of historical events and developments in the history of East Slavic languages
- Language bans in Tsarist Russia
- Stalin's language policy of Russification
- Assimilation policy in the multilingual USSR
- After the break-up of the Soviet Union counter-movements, such as decommunization, de-Russification

This small list of examples must suffice here for reasons of space. Some of these points will be taken up and discussed in the case studies in the following sections.

As an interim conclusion after the previous reflections, it should be noted that this article looks at the language situation in Ukraine through a postcolonialistic lens in the following case studies. This is intended to take account of current debates and provide clarity on current debates on colonialism and their relationship to the language situation. In principle, however, the approach using postcolonial linguistics should remain one of the possible approaches to

researching the multifaceted language situation in Ukraine and should not be or become the only way of reading it. The article returns to these questions under conclusions.

4. Case Studies

In relation to the case studies, three conceptual foundations are important. First, in line with the focus of this article, we analyze the case studies in terms of language ideologies in relation to language policy and language situation. Since language ideologies have already been defined in section 2, the term language policy will be briefly addressed here. This comprises six areas (Marten, 2016, pp. 24–29): planning of language corpus, status, prestige, acquisition, use, and discourse. Due to the limited space in this article, we will limit ourselves to planning of status and prestige and only include the other areas in selected contexts.

Secondly, a further conceptual basis for analyzing the case studies concerns the asymmetry of the language situations in multilingual Eastern Europe. Asymmetry and hierarchization of languages are associated with language conflicts. In relation to this, the conceptual basis for the following case studies is the multifactorial model of language conflicts developed by M. Wingender, which comprises four types: languages in conflict, language(s) as objects in conflicts, conflicts about language(s), language(s) of conflict (Wingender, 2021, pp. 28–30). The following analysis in the case studies focuses on the type 'conflicts about language(s)'. This is because this type of language conflict is associated with fields of linguistics that are also the focus of this article: language ideologies, language policy, language of politics. This is about "e.g., ethnolinguistic conflicts, conflicts of interest between speech communities, status and acquisition questions, functional spheres of language use, majority-minority-debates, renaming of places, streets or cities and replacing of language signs" (Wingender, 2021, p. 30). It is obvious that these aspects are relevant for the postcolonialistic perspective on the language situation.

Thirdly, we include the concept of 'language empire' in our investigation. The volume by Stolz 2015 refers to this term by Phillipson: as this volume comprises several articles on Eastern Europe, we quote from it: "The central concept for language empires (as well as their political or economic counterparts) is, of course, power, as stated in Phillipson's definition (1997, p. 238, cited in Hamel, 2006b, p. 2254) of linguistic imperialism as "[...] the imposi-

tion of power relations mediated by language dichotomies that create a hierarchization of languages."" (Stolz, 2015, p. vii)

4.1. Soviet language policy and Russification

Language policy in the Soviet Union was not homogeneous and was characterized by different, sometimes abruptly changing phases. We focus on three language policy phases with their respective strategies.

The first phase, the 1920s, is regarded as the golden age of language policy (Glück, 1984, p. 535). The main strategy in this phase was "classic language planning" (Jernudd & Nekvapil, 2012, p. 21), because the multilingual Soviet Union was characterized by great language diversity. The approximately 130 languages were characterized by genetic diversity as well as very different numbers of speakers and, above all, very different degrees of standardization (Glück, 1984). This posed problems for the language policy and the language ideology of the Soviet Union. Officially, the multilingual state propagated the equality of languages, however these were hardly in a position to function equally due to their different degrees of standardization. Ukrainian was one of the languages of the Soviet Union that benefited from the policy of "korenizatsiia" (nativization or indigenization) during this phase. For under the tsarist regime Ukrainian was subject to strong Russification, so that it had low prestige at the beginning of the 20thcentury (Grenoble, 2003, p. 83; see also the overview of the history of Russian in Ukraine by Moser, 2022, and Danylenko & Naienko, 2019). As noted in Kiss & Wingender (2025), in Tsarist Russia, the closer the regions were to the center of the empire (as in the case of Ukraine), the more restrictive the nationality policy was, whereas regions further away were less affected (Glück, 1984, p. 525). In the phase of Ukrainization as part of korenizatsiia, this changed significantly due to intense corpus and status planning (Kiss & Wingender, 2025, p. 727; Kulyk, 2014, p. 209; see the overview on Ukrainization in Shevelov, 1989, chapter 5). Overall, Soviet language policy in this phase was characterized by the discrepancy between the ideology of the equality of languages and language diversity, including different quantitative and qualitative conditions for the functioning of the languages.

The language policy changed abruptly under Stalin, especially since the mid-1930s. This phase can be characterized as a clear Russification. The policy of korenizatsiia ended (Grenoble, 2003, p. 54) and instead the status and spread of Russian was intensively promoted, e.g. by the *Decree on the com-*

pulsory teaching of Russian in 1938, which was an open contradiction to the official ideology of equality of languages in the USSR.

This cemented the hierarchization of languages in the USSR, despite the official ideology of linguistic equality. Thus, the languages were grouped in a five-category system. In this system, the status of the language was linked to the administrative status of the territory. Russian became the Union-wide language of inter-national communication ("jazyk mežnacional'nogo obščenija"), Ukrainian fell into the category "Literary and national languages, titular languages of the Union Republics", other categories included the languages of the autonomous republics and national districts as well as non-written languages (Glück, 1984, pp. 547–548). On the one hand, there were pragmatic reasons for selecting one language as the main means of communication in a multinational state; on the other hand, asymmetrical language relations were promoted and, by emphasizing Russian, an ideology of superiority was effectively pursued. To characterize the effects of this phase of language policy, we return to the concept of the 'language empire': "The spread of dominant languages (as native and/or foreign languages) is only one side of the coin, the other is language shift that leads to attrition, endangerment and obsolescence of marginalized languages." (Stolz, 2015, p. vii).

Traits of such developments can be revealed in the language policy of the Soviet Union, especially in its next phase after Stalin's death. This phase from the 1950s onwards is characterized by growing assimilation. "The Khrushchev era (1953–1964) introduced the vision of a new Soviet people, united not only politically, but also through the use of one language. Khrushchev emphatically declared Russian to be "the second national language." On the one hand an open policy of bilingualism was promoted, but on the other the very need for national languages, i.e. any language other than Russian, was questioned. Whereas under Lenin all languages were guaranteed equal rights, under Khrushchev the issue of the "relative" importance of languages was introduced into Soviet polemics." (Grenoble, 2003, p. 57).

The model of mass bilingualism pursued during this phase (national-Russian bilingualism, nacional'no-russkoe dvujazyčie (Haarmann, 1999, pp. 848–851)) again reveals the discrepancy of such asymmetrical relationships. On the one hand, a bilingualism model was seen as necessary for communication in a state with 130 languages; on the other hand, this model promoted hierarchical relationships between the languages. Since Russian was always a component of the respective bilingualism combination, this further intensified the spread

of Russian and the restriction of the national languages. Thus, there was no need for the Russian population in Ukraine or Belarus, for example, to learn the titular language of the respective Union republic. The result was the growing assimilation and language shift. The hierarchization of languages was also associated with different levels of prestige. The high prestige of Russian contrasted with the lower prestige of languages such as Ukrainian and Belarusian, which were regarded as provincial (Pavlenko, 2008a, p. 301). The declining prestige was in turn one of the reasons for the declining proficiency in the national languages.

The result at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union was the widespread use of Russian among the speakers of the national languages, while only a small proportion of the Russian population had proficiency in the respective titular language of their republic (Haarmann, 1999, p. 848; Grenoble, 2003, pp. 195–196 calls this "unidirectional bilingualism") and the titular population also had a low level of proficiency in their titular language (Pavlenko, 2008a, p. 283). However, it should be emphasized that the reasons for this development cannot be seen solely in the language policy of the Soviet Union, as other societal and economic developments such as industrialization and urbanization also contributed to the spread of Russian (cf. the discussion of these factors in Grenoble, 2003, chapter 8). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this language situation led to language conflicts – to varying degrees in the different post-Soviet states (Pavlenko, 2008b). In the course of the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of the successor states [8] declared their respective titular language to be the official state language in order to strengthen the link between language and national identity. Russian was assigned a very different status in the 14 successor states of the USSR outside Russia (Pavlenko, 2008b). Due to Russification and the low proficiency in the titular language, this led to both changing language policy phases and intense societal disputes over the role of languages in the years that followed. V. Kulyk speaks of a "large-scale discrepancy between ethnic identification and language use" (Kulyk, 2014, p. 202). Conflicts about languages still characterize most post-Soviet states today. V. Kulyk sees these conflicts to a particularly high degree in Ukraine: "Although the discrepancy

[8] The Transcaucasian republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia did not enact any new language laws, as they had already regulated the use of language in their republics in their constitutions in 1978 (Grenoble, 2003, p. 205).

was to be found in many other parts of the former USSR, in Ukraine its scale was larger than in most of the other union republics that became independent in 1991 (and comparable to patterns found in the lower-level autonomous units within the Russian Federation), primarily because of the more aggressive linguistic Russification of the late Soviet decades. Remarkably, this discrepancy persists in post-Soviet Ukraine, even though its policies with regard to ethnicity and language differ significantly from those of the Soviet regime. The continuation of this phenomenon in a radically different political and cultural context warrants its classification as a legacy of the communist decades [...]" (Kulyk, 2014, p. 202).

This described discrepancy and changing language policy phases persisted in Ukraine. There has been a dramatic change in Ukraine's language situation since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which will be discussed in the next case study.

4.2. Decommunization and de-Russification in today's Ukraine

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine's language policy has aimed to eliminate the discrepancy between language use and ethnic identification described above in various phases and with varying strategies. For reasons of space, we will skip these complex processes by referring to the analysis of language policy phases by J. Besters-Dilger (2011). Instead, the following case study begins with the language ideological developments since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. The previous case study ended with Kulyk's quotation on "more aggressive linguistic Russification of the late Soviet decades" (Kulyk, 2014, p. 202). Now the focus is on de-Russification in Ukraine's language situation as resistance to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In this short case study, only selected aspects [9] of the dramatically changing language situation can be discussed (for detailed and comprehensive analyses, see Azhniuk (2024), Kiss & Wingender (2025), and Shumytska & Krouglov (2025) as examples). Accordingly, three developments are selected below: Language laws with regard to decommunization and de-Russification, language shift from Russian to Ukrainian, and the end of the debate on pluricentricity in the Russian language in Ukraine.

[9] Due to space limitations, this article does not, for example, address the comprehensive topic of the role of Surzhyk in the Soviet Union and Ukraine, cf. recent literature such as Hentschel & Palinska (2022), Kostiučenko (2023), Masenko (2019).

We start with language laws with regard to decommunization and de-Russification. In Wingender's language conflict model (2021), these concern the language conflict type "conflicts about language(s)". In a brief retrospective, it is worth recalling the heated debates triggered by the language law of 2012 *About the principles of the state language policy*. This was based on the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, which wrongly included Russian as one of Ukraine's minority languages. Russian thus does not fulfill the definition of a regional or minority language as defined in the Charter (for detailed analysis, see Moser, 2013). Due to this law Russian benefited in particular, in contrast to the genuine minority languages in Ukraine. This law was first repealed at the Euromaidan in 2014. However, it had to remain in force until 2018 (for reasons, see Besters-Dilger, 2023, p. 4).

With regard to de-Russification and Ukrainization, the *Law of Ukraine on Education* (2017) should be mentioned, which introduced an essential Ukrainization in the school system. The increase of Ukrainian-language instruction sparked debates regarding the use of minority languages. "However, the language article of the educational law was heavily criticized at the diplomatic level by officials of the Russian Federation, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Poland and Moldova. In addition, the Venice Commission published a critical opinion, recommending that the Ukrainian government provide high-standard education in both state and minority languages" (Kiss & Wingender, 2025, p. 732). [10]

The State Language Law 2019 *On ensuring the functioning of the Ukrainian language as the state language* is aimed at broader Ukrainization in various domains. It concerned the promotion of Ukrainian in numerous areas of society. It was passed in the final days of Poroshenko's presidency and came into force after Zelenskyy's election. Ukrainization was furthermore promoted by additional measures (Kiss & Wingender, 2025, p. 733).

In addition to the intense promotion of Ukrainian, the language policy with regard to English in Ukraine also needs to be addressed. On the one hand, it aims to promote the role and use of English in Ukraine. In 2023, President Zelenskyy introduced the law *On the use of the English language in Ukraine* into parliament, "marking a significant event in language planning during the

[10] Due to space limitations, the measures in dealing with minority languages in Ukraine cannot be listed here. An overview is provided in the volume *Contested Language Diversity in Wartime Ukraine* (Kiss & Wingender, 2025).

war. The bill specified compulsory English learning at pre-school, school, and university levels, state examinations in English, and defined eight categories of civil servants who must be proficient in English." (Krouglov, 2025, p. 243). This law sparked intense debate (see Krouglov, 2025, p. 247). On the other hand, this language policy in Ukraine is also a replacement of Russian as the language of international communication, as it was in the Soviet Union. At the time of the Soviet Union, Russian also became one of the world languages. [11] In addition to the need to promote English proficiency in Ukraine and pragmatic aspects, attitudes that go beyond this are also evident: a commitment to the language of the West and NATO as well as a rejection of the language of the aggressor. "When the Ukrainian government proposed the Bill, their aim was to disentangle Ukraine from the Russian language and culture, and to reduce and limit the use of Russian in international communication. The goal was that when Ukrainians meet people from other countries of the former Soviet Union, their first possible language would be English, which does not have any past colonial associations and is widely viewed as the language of future and progress." (Krouglov, 2025, p. 248). The last aspect mentioned in the quote refers to attitudes and is essential when we ask whether this new asymmetrical situation between Ukrainian and the imperial and global language English could repeat mechanisms of Soviet language policy and Russification. The current anglicization is of a different nature, as it is focused on international communication and not toward restricting the functions of the state language Ukrainian, which is instead being promoted very intensely. Another significant difference is that English is not learned as a native language in Ukraine, as is the case with Russian, so that from the perspective of the state language, there is no danger of replacing a lack of knowledge of Ukrainian with English.

The changes in Ukraine's language situation, that Russia's full-scale invasion since 2022 has triggered in the area of the language shift to Ukrainian, are also very striking and significant for the relationship between Ukrainian and Russian and Ukrainization. "What Ukraine has not achieved by means of its language policy in 30 years, Russia has provoked by attacking its neighbor. This full-scale war is promoting a change in language." (Kulyk, 2022, p. 237). These changes are linked to both language use and language prestige (Pidkui-

[11] "A symbolic indicator of this was the acknowledgment of Russian as an official language by the United Nations." (Haarmann, 1992, p. 125).

mukha, 2024; Renchka, 2023; Tsar, 2024). The new developments are most evident in the area of language prestige: Ukrainian became the language of resistance as a result of the war, while Russian became the language of the aggressor (Kulyk, 2022). Comprehensive linguistic strategies are being developed in relation to "resistance" and "aggressor", as A. Rabus reveals on the basis of social media. He shows "that the analysis of linguistic behavior on social media helps to shed light on how Ukrainians cope with Russia's war of aggression and how they use social media as a tool for decolonial resistance.' (Rabus, 2025, p. 1).

As far as language shift is concerned, the different forms of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism mean that it is not so easy for everyone to switch from Russian to Ukrainian immediately. This raises the question of whether these developments in terms of the prestige and symbolic role of languages also reflect corresponding changes in language use. It can be stated that the numerous surveys conducted in recent years point in one direction: Ukrainization, which is being pushed by language policy, is now increasingly reflected in changes in language use due to Russia's brutal war of aggression (cf. the surveys in Kulyk, 2022 and Kulyk, 2024).

The decreasing role of Russian is also reflected in the end of the debate about pluricentricity in Russian and about a national variety of Russian in Ukraine. With regard to pluricentricity, according to Wingender's model of language conflict types, the type "conflicts about language(s)" overlaps with the type "language(s) as object in conflicts". In addition to language-political conflicts, this also involves questions of standardization. What is the background to this debate? The detailed explanation in Wingender (accepted) is briefly summarized here: The question arises, why no comparable pluricentrism has developed in the Russian language in the different language situations of the post-Soviet states as in other "world's 'big' languages of international communication (for instance, English, French or Spanish)" (Kamusella, 2018, p. 153). From a standardological perspective, one reason for this can be seen in the standard language type of Russian, as it is monocentric, associated with the great prestige of the 'literaturnyj jazyk' and a strong tradition in language culture. In the debate as to whether Russian in Ukraine can be regarded as a national variety of Russian, we follow Moser's assessment: "Keines der Merkmale begründet jedoch zwingend die Existenz einer einheitlichen ukrainischen Variante der russischen Sprache, umso weniger die Notwendigkeit ihrer

Standardisierung […]" [12] (Moser, 2022, p. 418). Since Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014, the media debate has intensified with regard to the development of a national variety of Russian in Ukraine. One of the triggers was T. Snyder's proposal to create an Institute of Russian Language and Culture in Ukraine, arguing: "If you officially had your own Ukrainian version of the Russian language that would be a very powerful argument against the Russian propaganda" (Snyder, 2019). The intense debate of Russian in Ukraine ended abruptly due to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 and the strong stigmatization of Russian in Ukraine.

5. Results and conclusions

Both case studies reveal that, from a postcolonialistic perspective, multifaceted practices in language ideology and language policy can be recognized. The case studies also show that the reading should not only be postcolonialistic. With regard to Soviet language policy, for example, it has been revealed that several reasons and factors must be taken into account. On the one hand, Russification is the result of the language ideology of Russian as the second mother tongue and the model of mass bilingualism that developed unidirectionally. On the other hand, there are other factors that led to the growing spread of Russian, such as urbanization and industrialization. Russification also plays a role in those factors, but in the context of many others, such as economic, political, and demographic factors. The developments in language policy were more complex and multilayered than a purely post-colonial lens would indicate.

In summary, this leads to a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of analyzing Ukraine's language situation through a postcolonial lens. Does this provide new insights into sociolinguistic analysis, or does it narrow the perspective?

One of the advantages of the postcolonial lens is that it makes developments in Ukrainian language policy more tangible, such as the decommunization laws as a countermovement to the colonial practices of the Soviet Union, language laws to promote Ukrainian due to the former restriction of Ukrainian and language bans in Tsarist Russia. The postcolonial lens thus better explains why which directions are taken in language ideology and language policy. It

[12] "None of the features, however, necessarily establishes the existence of a uniform Ukrainian variant of Russian, all the less the need for its standardization [...]".

also helps to reveal discrepancies and areas of tension based on the concepts of asymmetry, power and language empire. The postcolonial lens thus connects linguistics more intensely with current societal and political debates. It brings linguistics more strongly into societal debates.

One of the disadvantages is that the term 'postcolonial' with its conceptual framing reduces sociolinguistic analysis to a set of keywords. It also steers the view in one direction, which means that other reasons and factors are not seen equally in relation to certain developments. In the current debate, the term 'postcolonial' narrows the discussion to the relationship between Ukrainian and Russian – to the Ukrainian state language and its historically asymmetrical language situation with Russian. The overall picture also includes the minority languages of Ukraine. The complex picture of Ukraine's language diversity can be analyzed more comprehensively with the help of multifactorial language situation models, e.g. from multilingualism research, which also reveal asymmetries and hierarchies between the languages.

A consistent continuation of the use of the term 'postcolonial' raises further questions in relation to the language situation in Ukraine: The current language policy with regard to the promotion of English in Ukraine (Krouglov, 2025) once again incorporates an imperial or this time even global language, English, into the language ideology. For international communication, it is essential that the current leading world language is given appropriate consideration in school education. However, a language law on the use of the English language in Ukraine in the acute war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine has further implications. "This unprecedented legislation, for a country that is neither part of the British Commonwealth nor a former British colony, grants English a unique status in a nation at war with Russia." (Krouglov, 2025, p. 244). And how will the new combination of the Ukrainian state language with "*the* hegemonic world language" (Hamel, 2006, p. 2247) develop? What differences arise from the fact that Russian and Ukrainian are East Slavic languages and English and Ukrainian belong to different language groups of the Indo-European languages? From the perspective of postcolonial linguistics, it must be emphasized: The dealing with imperial languages remains a difficult and very complex task for the societies concerned. And how should the asymmetry of the language situation in Ukraine itself be assessed, i.e. the relationship between the Ukrainian state language and the (peripheral) minority languages? What are the further effects on language diversity, which is particularly endangered by forced migration and flight in

times of war? Not least in view of these questions, it is essential that the application of the postcolonial linguistics approach to the language situation in Ukraine continues to be combined with other sociolinguistic approaches to the analysis of multilingual language situations in order to uncover multifaceted developments.

Following this examination of postcolonial perspectives on Ukraine, we will conclude by asking what insights the case of Ukraine provides for postcolonial linguistics. In this context, it is important to emphasize the complex nature of colonial influences, as Ukraine has been shaped by influences from various empires (Polish, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian). These multilayered colonial references reveal different mechanisms and correlations between political, cultural, and linguistic factors in the development of the language situation. Furthermore, many of the questions raised above can also be asked here. The analysis of the language situation in Ukraine, with its complex history and long historical development of the relationship between Russian and Ukrainian, contributes comprehensive insights into asymmetries and power relations in relation to this complex bilingual situation. The new model of asymmetrical relationships promoted in current language policy—that between the imperial-global language English and Ukrainian—provides equally comprehensive insights into asymmetries. Moreover, research findings on the development of the discrepancy between language policy and language reality since the collapse of the Soviet Union are significant. Analyzing the role of language in the context of political turning points is a very important research topic and concerns not only Ukraine, but all post-Soviet states. Furthermore, the current research contributions on language in war are particularly relevant. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine reveals extensive and dramatic developments in language use, corpus, status, prestige, and acquisition. Linguistics can observe and analyze in detail how dealing with the imperial and Soviet heritage is debated in the society.

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