

Natalia Kobchenko

National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy
Kyiv, Ukraine

n.kobchenko@ukma.edu.ua
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4369-5909>

FAVORITE LETTER: SHIFTS IN LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES AS REFLECTIONS OF OVERCOMING POSTCOLONIAL AMBIVALENCE IN WARTIME

Abstract

Background. *Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, besides all traumatic consequences for Ukrainian society, has led to fundamental shifts in self-awareness and self-identification of Ukrainians, and these shifts have been reflected in language ideologies. In addition to explicit changes regarding the switching of a significant percentage of Russophone Ukrainians to the Ukrainian language, there have also been profound changes concerning rethinking the role of language in constructing identity and preserving statehood.*

Contribution to the research field. *This study serves as a case analysis examining the development of language ideologies within a postcolonial society through their expression in various textual and visual representations of a single symbol—the letter “i”, which has emerged as a symbol of the Ukrainian language and a marker of its distinctiveness. The importance and originality of this study lie in the fact that it helps us to understand the cultural and psychological shifts in society during the period of a unique historical experience: from the formal liberation from colonial dependence to the time of armed resistance to recolonization.*

Purpose. *This study aims to analyze language ideologies of Ukrainians represented by the letter “i” from 1991 to the present day and find out how they reflect different modes of thinking regarding colonial experience, its realization and overcoming.*

Methods. *The research methodology is based on the theoretical framework of such interdisciplinary fields as postcolonial studies, language ideology, and critical discourse analysis. Taking into account the diversity of empirical mate-*

rial, in addition, certain insights of graphic linguistics, studies of linguistic landscape, and geosemiotics have been added to the research tools.

Results. Until February 24, 2022, the language ideologies of Ukrainian society represented by the letter “i” reflected a state of postcolonial ambivalence. The language ideologies of uniqueness, attitude towards the language as a national treasure, and sacralization conveyed an anticolonial mode of thinking, as they were aimed at denying Soviet narratives about inferiority, provincialism, and the unprestigious status of the Ukrainian language. Meanwhile, the ideology of femininity expressed the colonial way of thinking directly as it embodied a view of oneself from the colonizer’s perspective. The language ideologies of weakness and endangerment as a legacy of being under the control of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were triggered by the strong position of the Russian language in the public space.

After February 24, 2022, the language ideologies of femininity, weakness, and endangerment represented by the letter “i” have been displaced by ideologies of masculinity, strength, and resistance, broadcasting anticolonial thinking. At the same time, certain tendencies testify to the decolonization of thinking as well: 1) the attitude towards language as a national treasure (a feature of postcolonial societies) has changed to a pragmatic attitude (as a means of communication); 2) the ideology of uniqueness has not been based on the opposition to the Russian language but instead realized in a global context, which evidences a departure from the cognitive dichotomy “colonizer – colonized”; 3) the role of the Ukrainian language in constructing identity and maintaining sovereignty has transited from symbolic to practical.

Discussion. In Ukraine, the process of overcoming colonialism and coloniarity unfolds in a non-linear way. After formal liberation from political dependence in 1991, the period of postcolonial ambivalence, which is inherent in the coexistence of anticolonial and colonial modes of thinking, occurred. After Russia’s full-scale invasion, the process of decolonization was activated, which coincides with anticolonial resistance that is reflected in thinking as well, in particular in the transformation of linguistic ideologies.

Keywords: language ideology, Ukrainian language, the letter “i”, colonial thinking, anticolonial thinking, postcolonial ambivalence, decolonization.

1. Introduction

Until recently, scholars had to prove the appropriateness of approaching postcolonial methodology to studying the Successor States of the USSR (Moore, 2001), in particular Ukraine (Riabczuk, 2013). Russia’s full-scale in-

vasion of Ukraine resolved many questions, as it has revealed the imperial essence of the aggressor state. As Timothy Snyder argues, «it is a colonial war in the sense that Russia meant to conquer, dominate displace, exploit. And it's an imperial war in the sense that in choosing to fight this war, Russian elites were self-consciously defining themselves as an empire as opposed to a normal state» (LRT English, 2023).

The full-scale phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war caused decisive changes in the ecosystem, economic, social, and cultural spheres, as well changes of significant importance regarding self-awareness and self-identification of Ukrainians, which have manifested themselves in the language ideologies. In addition to the explicit changes regarding language choices of everyday communication and the attitude towards the status of the Russian language in Ukraine (as can be seen from the survey – The sixth national poll, 2022), there are also deep implicit shifts, connected with the reflections on the status of the Ukrainian language and its role in conducting Ukrainian identity.

This study aims to retrospectively examine the language ideologies of Ukrainian society through the lens of postcolonial and decolonial theories and determine how they reflect different modes of thinking regarding colonial experience, its realization and overcoming. This is a sort of case study that explores the evolution of language ideologies in postcolonial society on the basis of their representations by various textual and visual manifestations of the only sign – the letter «ї», which has become the symbol of the Ukrainian language and the marker of its uniqueness. Since there is no such letter in other Slavic alphabets, it has become a character of originality of the Ukrainian language. Its presence in the spelling of the emblematic words such as *Україна* ‘Ukraine’ and *Київ* ‘Kyiv’ enhances this symbolism.

Certain aspects of shifts in the language situation and language system caused by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine have already been analyzed, in particular in some volumes such as “Mova i viina: dynamika movnoi systemy i movna polityka” (“Language and War: Dynamics of the Language System and Language Politics”) (Azhniuk, 2024), “Contested Language Diversity in Wartime Ukraine: National Minorities, Language Biographies, and Linguistic Landscape” (Kiss & Wingender, 2025), and “Languages and Cultures in Times of War” (Shumytska & Krouglov, 2025). The authors of these and other papers have noted in passing the symbolism of the letter “ї” generally (Kosmeda, 2020, pp. 15–17) and, in particular, the symbolic meaning of letters in this war (Ruda, 2025, pp. 43–44). Particular

attention is given to the letter “ї” in N. Gergało-Dąbek’s paper (Gergało-Dąbek, 2023). The scholar describes examples of textual and visual representations of this letter as an “epitome of Ukrainian identity”, provides some cases of its use in naming practices, and outlines its employment as a symbol of resistance in occupied Ukrainian cities. Although the ideological function of this letter, which has changed during the armed aggression of the Russian Federation, makes a case for the requirement of a holistic analysis with a retrospective approach.

An equally important mission of this article is to demonstrate the applicability of certain concepts developed to explain social processes in so-called traditional colonies to analyze the past and present of Ukraine. This fact will become one more argument in favor of the universality of the postcolonial and decolonial perspectives for studying the practices of establishing and preserving the dominance of one state formation over another, and the consequences of this dominance.

In the second section, the research methodology is characterized, based mainly on the theoretical principles of postcolonial studies, language ideology, and historical discourse analysis. In particular, comprehension of such concepts as colonial thinking, anticolonial thinking, postcolonial state, and decolonization is provided with regard to their specific application in the Ukrainian context. The third section describes the sources of empirical material and the process of its selection. The fourth section outlines symbolic meanings of the letter “ї” in the late Soviet period, serving as a background for analysis. In the fifth section, the language ideologies represented by the textual and visual manifestations of the letter “ї” till February 24, 2022 are analyzed, and in the sixth section, its new symbolic meanings and ideological functions are addressed, which can be observed after February 24, 2022. The seventh section summarizes the shifts in the language ideologies of Ukrainians that have taken place after Russia’s full-scale invasion and highlights those changes that testify to the overcoming of colonial structures of thinking.

2. Methodological framework

A mixed methods approach based on theoretical issues of several interdisciplinary fields is employed in this research. The main focus is on postcolonial studies, language ideology, and critical discourse analysis. The analysis of the language ideologies of the Ukrainian society is conducted through the lens of postcolonial and decolonial theories; therefore, it is important to outline the

application of its key concepts. This study employs the statement about the persistence of colonialism, i.e., different forms of control and domination of one state over another, even after formal liberation from political dependence, as a starting point for the research. It uses the framework of scholars elaborating on the concept of ‘coloniality’, the main feature of which is self-understanding within the dichotomy ‘colonizer–colonized’ (Mignolo, 2005; Grosfoguel, 2006; Quijano, 2007). Summarizing the features of coloniality provided in these papers, O. Kotliar outlines its three dimensions: “a) as a space that has been politically hierarchical, preserving and reproducing colonial structures; b) as a state of those who, despite decolonisation in political and legal spheres, remained in the space, built and equipped by the coloniser, where the colonial model continues to (self-reproduce; c) as a new form of interaction between the coloniser and the colonised outside of colonial structures” (Kotliar, n.d.).

One of the main concepts employed by scholars to describe manifestations of coloniality in the contemporary world is colonial thinking. There are two conceptions of this phenomenon developed in two different fields of research. W. Mignolo considers this occurrence in the social dimension as a modern epistemological system that qualifies all non-European knowledge and non-European cultures as inferior or insignificant, and he uses the term “colonial thinking” (Mignolo, 2009; Mignolo, 2013). E.J.R. David and S. Okazaki, who work with this occurrence in the field of psychology, define it as a state of consciousness in which individuals or groups consider their identity as secondary in comparison with a former colonizer, and they use the term “colonial mentality” (David & Okazaki, 2006a). In examining Filipinos in the United States, scholars identify four stages of colonial mentality: the first involves denigration of the Filipino self; the second, denigration of Filipino culture or the body; the third, discrimination against less Americanized Filipinos; and the fourth, the tolerance of both historical and contemporary oppression of Filipinos and Filipino Americans (David & Okazaki, 2006b). Applying this concept to the Ukrainian historical experience, it seems to be appropriate to interpret it as an inherited by the Ukrainian society way of self-identification and self-assessment within the frame of the semantic opposition “Russia – Ukraine” where the former component embraces such associations as “great”, “progressive”, “prestige”, and the latter one is “little”, “inferior”, “provincial” Being in this cognitive frame leads to

admiring Russian culture as a standard¹, thus a view of oneself from the colonizer's perspective proceeds to reproduce the inferiority complex in each subsequent generation². Also, the term “colonial thinking” seems to be more appropriate in researching language ideologies, as it is considered a process of forming ideas, perceptions, judgments, and beliefs about oneself and the world.

Profound analysis of Ukraine's experience after declaring independence in 1991 entails incorporating the concepts anticolonial, postcolonial, and decolonial that construct different terms combined with various nouns. Most often, these terms are used to define different historical periods or different modes of thinking (Pavlyshyn, 1997; Shkandrij & Kravchenko, n.d.). It is worth emphasizing some interpretative issues in the context of the current research.

Firstly, this concerns anticolonial thinking, which means resistance to imperial governance, denying the scale of values established by the colonizer, and the intellectual and cultural opposition (Pavlyshyn, 1997, pp. 226–227; Shkandrij, 2023; Kassymbekova & Chokobaeva, 2023). An important feature of anticolonial thinking is that it maintains its holder within the dichotomy “colonizer–colonized”, since it uses an upside-down assessment scale as a tool to counter imperial narratives. In particular, in the Ukrainian context, anticolonial discursive practices imply the celebration of individuals, events, and artifacts that deny the inferiority of the Ukrainian culture and were marginalized or erased by Soviet governance (Pavlyshyn, 1997, p. 226). The constant efforts to emphasize the superiority of Ukrainian culture and the antiquity of Ukrainian history, which sometimes leads to hyperbolization and the construction of new national myths, can also be added to these practices.

Secondly, it is worth noting the interpretative and methodological diversity of the term “postcolonial”. Latin American scholars reject the concept of

¹ A special study is required on the tendency to label Ukrainian artists by combining the adjective “Ukrainian” with the surname of a prominent Russian figure, for example: Ivan Franko as the “Ukrainian Dostoevsky” (see: <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=747385>), Ihor Pavliuk as the “Ukrainian Lermontov” (see: <https://zolotapektoral.te.ua/спогади-про-українського-поета-іропа/>).

Also noteworthy in this context is the title of the book by Leonid Kuchma, President of Ukraine from 1994 to 2005 — “*Ukraine Is Not Russia*” (2003) — primarily addressed to an international audience.

² Inferiority complex of Ukrainians have been described with the term “malorosiystvo” (‘little Russianism’) (Malaniuk, 1959; Lysiak-Rudnytskyi, 2019; Solchanyk, 1992; Riabchuk, 2000, pp. 194–219).

“postcolonial thinking” as they consider postcolonial studies a product of Western academia (Mignolo, 2007) and argue that its focus is on historical colonialism. In contrast, they develop decolonial theory and elaborate on the concept of “decolonial thinking”. However, these two concepts seem to be applied to one theoretical framework. As an attribute lexeme “postcolonial” indeed describes better a historical period rather a mode of thinking. At the same time, it does not seem to be a period of decolonization, but rather preparation for or transition to it. Also, it is hard to accept the statement that “postcolonial” means precisely “departure” from such oppositions as “center–peripheries”, “empire–colony”, “high culture–low culture” (see Skandrij & Kravchenko, n.d. approach). More convincing, however, seems to be the observation of M. Mellino who argues: “The postcolonial could therefore be considered as a political expression aimed at describing tensions and conflicts of an ongoing “long transition,” of a contradictory phase characterized by a past that does not pass and a future that has not yet arrived” (Mellino, 2018, p. 13). On the other hand, it cannot be denied that this term embraces: a critical understanding of colonialism, in particular how colonialism shapes culture, beliefs, power hierarchies, etc.; analysis of its consequences (Pavlyshyn, 2023); and “revisions and recombinations of narratives rooted in the traumatic colonial past” (Biedarieva, n.d.). Taking it into consideration, as well as the Ukrainian experience, we distinguish two uses and understandings of the term “postcolonial”:

- 1) Postcolonial period – a period that begins with the moment of formal liberation and is marked by ambivalence, which consists of the co-existence of colonial and anticolonial thinking structures, inherited imperial and restored or newly constructed national narratives, seeking for or restoration of national identity, and attempting to depart from the borders of the opposition “colonizer–colonized”. In the present study, the concept of “social ambivalence” is employed, which in general is defined as “the simultaneous orientation of individuals toward incompatible, mutually exclusive values and preferences” (Riabchuk, 2019, p. 152);
- 2) Postcolonial analysis – the process of reflecting on the consequences of colonialism, estimating their influence on the present by revealing colonial practices, ideas, narratives, and structures of thought that have still been preserved.

And finally, overcoming the aforementioned ambivalence, conscious rejection of colonial thinking structures, which entails a departure from the dichot-

omy “colonizer–colonized” in self-awareness and self-presentation, can be defined with the notion “decolonization”. This departure means a refusal to orient oneself towards the former metropole and to contend with it, and as a result, abolish the inferiority complex. Accordingly, it seems to be logical to understand “decolonial” both as a practice of overcoming postcolonial ambivalence and a mode of thinking. In a global context, W. Mignolo argues that “the task of de-colonial thinking and the enactment of the de-colonial option in the 21st century starts from epistemic de-linking: from acts of epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo, 2009, p. 15). In the context of the Ukrainian experience, decolonial thinking can be defined as a way of producing ideas, forming assessments and beliefs, constructing identity, and self-presentation, which is not based on the semantic opposition ‘Russia–Ukraine’, and is free of the inferiority complex and imperial narratives.

Researching of language ideologies of former colonized societies became one of the central fields in postcolonial linguistics. For they clearly reflect how political factors, social hierarchies, and cultural prejudices influence community beliefs and perceptions about development/ backwardness, correctness/ incorrectness, prestige/ insignificance, purity/ clutter etc. of their languages. The term “linguistic ideology” is used in the meaning of “this collective order, that is, the beliefs and attitudes that shape speakers’ relationships to their own and others’ languages, mediating between the social practice of language and the socioeconomic and political structures within which it occurs (Cavanaugh, 2020, p. 52). This study utilizes P.L. Garvin’s theoretical framework, which identifies four types of language attitudes—language loyalty, pride, desire to participate, and norm awareness (Garvin, 1993, pp. 47–48). The scholar further differentiates between pragmatic loyalty, characterized by a relatively detached belief in the superiority of one’s language, and emotional loyalty, referred to as the “national-treasure” attitude. This latter attitude reflects a deeply affectionate connection with one’s mother tongue and its standard variant, regarded as a vital and cherished component of national heritage (Garvin, 1993, p. 49). Studying language ideologies and language behavior of Ukrainians shows that the “national-treasure” attitude prevails in the society (Yavoriska, 2010; Kulyk, 2007; Riabchuk, 2019, p. 145), and that fact may be connected to their traumatic colonial experience. To cover all possible manifestations of language ideologies, according to K. Woolard, the concept of ‘representation of language ideology’ has been used. She notes, “Language ideologies occur not only as mental constructs and in verbalizations but also in

embodied practices and dispositions and in material phenomena such as visual representations" (Woolard, 2020, p. 2).

As for the commonly applied critical discourse analysis approach to the methodology of postcolonial linguistics and to analysing language ideologies, it seems to be appropriate to employ it in the present study. In particular, taking into account the peculiarities of the empirical material, the author adapts R. Wodak's methodology of the discourse-historical approach directed at analysing changes in discursive practices over a certain period (Wodak, 2009). Applying the discourse-historical approach to the study of changes in language ideologies and pointing at the specifics of their representation, it is relevant to mention generally the interaction between ideology and discourse formulated by M. Riabchuk: "Ideology is, first and foremost, a thing that is spoken about; discourse is how it is spoken, with what means, in what connection with the other narratives; discourse is also a particular perspective, selection of material, emphasis and hedging, omission; it is finally not only texts, but also various other forms of symbolic representation – from monuments to postage stamps, from military parades and national holidays to pictures in school textbooks" (Riabchuk, 2019, p. 57). Accordingly, in order to achieve the goal of the present study, discourse analysis entails revising texts, objects of linguistic landscape, curricula, visual content, etc., to reveal convictions and beliefs about language shaped under the influence of colonial policy and convictions and beliefs about language that testify to the liberation from colonial thinking structures.

Given the diversity of the collected material, some statements from other linguistic fields are employed in addition to the aforementioned research tools, namely:

- *Graphic linguistics* (as a comprehensive research field of written symbols). This field is based on the assertion that graphemes, besides their traditional function (to encode sounds in writing), can develop into independent lexemes and express a certain meanings, and in some cases, embody pragmatic functions in certain discourses (Kosmeda & Sobol, 2018, p. 65). As for the letter "i", it not only "undergoes semanticization and pragmatization, functioning as a productive mechanism for the formation of a system of nomens" (Kosmeda, 2020, pp. 16–17), but also, as this study shows, represents language ideologies.
- *Linguistic landscape*. The present study applies a wide interpretation of the concept "Linguistic landscape", according to which it is not limited by

“wall signs”, but “embraces the whole public space” (Shohamy & Waksman, 2009). B. Azhniuk argues for the hierarchical frame of this concept and divides it into the so-called core and the peripheral zone. In particular, he considers objects listed in Landry & Bourhis’s definition of the linguistic landscape (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) as a core manifestation. B. Azhniuk treats the other objects of public space that contain text messages, such as outfits and tattoos on visible parts of the body, as the peripheral zone, or micro-landscape. This approach is caused by the fact that they are also broadcasters of socially important messages for a wide audience (Azhniuk, 2024, pp. 91–93).

- *Geosemiotics*. R. Scollon and S.W. Scollon’s (2003) model of geosemiotics offers an effective way of analysing visual manifestations of the letter “ї” in the linguistic landscape and social media. As R. Scollon and S.W. Scollon state, geosemiotics is “the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world” (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 2). The framework of this approach brings 3 separate semiotic systems together: interactional order (analysis of target audience of the object of the linguistic landscape), visual semiotics (visual elements of the sign and means of its representation – font, colour, size etc.), and place semiotics (language code preference, especially in signs that use multiple codes, and locations where a sign is physically placed). In other words, geosemiotic analysis provides findings of how visual design, material, location, and social context of the sign determine its symbolic and ideological value.

3. Data collecting

As already mentioned, the empirical basis of the present research is a corpus of secondary textual and visual manifestations of the letter “ї” collected from various sources. The main selection criteria are accessibility and broad public awareness of the unit, i.e., its presence within the public real or virtual space. The sources for compiling this corpus include:

- 1) covers of Ukrainian language textbooks published from the late 1980s to the present, and popular social magazines targeted at the whole of Ukraine.
- 2) texts related to the letter “ї” that have become well-known or even a source of allusions in another textual or visual content.
- 3) platforms for e-learning that offer the Ukrainian language courses, such as: EdEra (<https://ed-era.com/courses/>); E-mova (E-MOBA, <https://emova.org>).

ua/courses/); Mova – DNK natsiyi (Мова – ДНК нації, <https://ukr-mova.in.ua>); Yedyni (Єдині, <https://yedyni.org>).

- 4) publications in central mass media, in particular “Ukrainska Pravda”, “UNIAN”, about events dedicated to Day of Ukrainian Writing and Language (November 9, October 27 from 2023 ³) and International Mother Language Day (February 21), as well as posts about this, which were wildly on Facebook.
- 5) Facebook posts published between 2010 ⁴ and 2025 by communities that pose themselves as language activists, namely: Chysta mova (Чиста мова ‘Pure Language’, <https://www.facebook.com/chystamova>), Ukrayins’ka mova (Українська мова ‘the Ukrainian Language’, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064482052811>), Davay zaymemsia textom (Давай зайдемось текстом ‘Let’s make text’, <https://www.facebook.com/make-texts>), Mova (<https://www.facebook.com/mova.ukr>), Portal movnoyi politky (Портал мовної політики ‘Language Policy Portal’, <https://www.facebook.com/language.policy>), Ukrainer (<https://www.facebook.com/ukrainernet>), Perehod’ na ukrayins’ku (Переходь на українську ‘Switch to Ukrainian’, <https://www.facebook.com/perehodnamovu>), Ukrayino-movnyy Kyiv (Україномовний Київ ‘Ukrainian-speaking Kyiv’, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukyiv>), #ukrayins’koyu (#українською ‘#in-Ukrainian’, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukrainskoiu>), Valentnist’ (Валентність ‘Valence’, <https://www.facebook.com/valency.rethink>), Navchay ukrayins’koyu (Навчай українською ‘Teach in Ukrainian’ <https://www.facebook.com/teach.in.ukrainian>); Shchebetarnia (Щебетарня ‘Twittering’, <https://www.facebook.com/shchebetarnya>), Bezkoshtovni kursy ukrayins’koyi movy (Безкоштовні курси української мови ‘Free Ukrainian language Courses’, <https://www.facebook.com/MovaKursy>), B’yurko-Mov’yurko (Б’юрко-мов’юрко ‘Language Bureau’, <https://www.facebook.com/BurkoMovurko/photos>), etc.
- 6) Since February 2022, posters by artists who actively respond to military and cultural events, in particular Nikita Titov (<https://www.facebook.com/nikitavltitov>) and Oleksandr Grekov (<https://www.facebook.com/aleksandr.drgrekhov>), have been added separately.

³ In 2023, following the adoption of a new ecclesiastical calendar that shifted fixed feasts by 13 days, the date of the Day of Ukrainian Writing and Language was changed by Presidential Decree No. 455/2023 from 9 November to 27 October.

⁴ The year in which the article’s author registered on this social media platform.

7) since Ukrainian clothing producers began to use the letter “ї” other slogans of Ukrainian resistance, and popular posters by artists in prints on T-shirts, sweatshirts, and souvenir items, these goods are included in the corpus; they were collected in the Google search engine using search queries ‘futbolka і купити/ buy і T-shirt’ (футболка і купити) та ‘futbolky з патріотичними принтами/ T-shirts with patriotic prints’ (футболки з патріотичними принтами).

4. Symbolic meanings of the letter “ї” in the late Soviet Period

Some ideological connotations of the letter “ї” could be observed even in the late Soviet period. First, this letter, together with the other ones that are absent from the Russian alphabet «і» and «е», was depicted on the cover of the Ukrainian language school textbooks, or, according to those titles, textbooks on the native language. On the one hand, such visual design provided to the letter “ї” a meaning of a symbol of the Ukrainian language, an attribute of its recognition and, on the other hand, served as an argument for Soviet narratives about “extreme closeness of the fraternal languages” that differ by only few of letters. Taking into consideration the total domination of the Russian language in all spheres of social life and in education, in particular, using this letter as a symbol of the Ukrainian language did not so much underline its uniqueness but labelled its nominal representation on the imperial linguistic map.

Secondly, in this period, appearance of one more symbolic meaning of the letter “ї” – verbalization of resistance can be observed. In the late 1980s, Lviv scholars, writers, and cultural activists launched “Independent Cultural Magazine «Ї»”, whose aim was to publish reflections about Ukrainian history and culture, vectors of its development, human rights, civil society, inter-ethnic relations, etc. Until 1995, issues had been made by photocopying in Vilnius, transferred to Lviv, stapled, and spread. One of the founders and editor-in-chief of the magazine Taras Vozniak mentions:

...decided to call it with one, but a very Ukrainian letter “ї”. It is the testimony of our uniqueness and at the same time the promise to dot the i's and cross the t's – “ї” (<https://blogs.pravda.com.ua/authors/voznyak/67643f7605fdd/> accessed 20.05.2025)

What is remarkable in this case, is that the letter “ї” is a kind of complex embodiment of Ukrainian identity and resistance to the Soviet system at the same time. This combination could be attributed to the metaphor of the status

of the colonized, for whom the choice of their own identity is equal to the confrontation with the empire that is trying to erase this identity.

In summary, these outcomes show that the ideological meaning of the letter “ї” that was shaped in the late Soviet period, on the one hand, was related to the official discourse as a representation of the exotism of the colonized that empires tolerate. And, on the other hand, having gained the connotation of resistance, it denoted the coming out of hiding for counter-discourse (anticolonial discourse).

5. The letter “ї” as a representation of language ideologies from 1991 to 2022: postcolonial ambivalence

After Ukraine proclaimed its independence, the necessity to resist the Soviet system/ colonial authorities formally disappeared. De jure, the secondary status of the Ukrainian language disappeared as well, but de facto, it is still maintained due to the fact that Russian has been dominant in most spheres of social life and has preserved the prestige status as a metropolitan language for quite a long time. The Ukrainian language starts to compete with Russian for communicative space and prestige. This fact might be a reason that, between the two mentioned above symbolic functions of the letter «ї», the first one began to spread and deepen and the second fell into decline: this graphic sign anchored as a symbol of the Ukrainian language and quit to be associated with resistance. Here are just a few examples: 1) in 2007-2008, the non-governmental organization “Don’t be Indifferent!” used this letter on the cover of their brochure, for the all-Ukrainian project “Switch to Ukrainian!” (<https://readymag.website/kis/nbb/> accessed 20.05.2025); 2) the community and organization Ukrainer, who positions themselves as a media forum with “unique stories, video and photo content about Ukrainian historical regions as well as about Ukrainian context abroad”, rendered its name in Latin letters but incorporated the letter “ї” in it (<https://www.ukrainer.net/expedition/> accessed 20.05.2025); 3) the community Ukrayinomovnyy Kyiv ‘Ukrainian-speaking Kyiv’ combined in its logo letters «К» and “ї” (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ukyiv> accessed 20.05.2025).

Experts in political studies, analysing the results of sociological surveys, have already emphasized the ambivalence of the language situation and language policy in Ukraine after 1991. Perhaps before 2022, the greatest paradoxes consist in the fact that: 1) a significant percentage of Ukrainians who consider Ukrainian their native language used Russian in everyday communication; 2) the percentage

of people who wanted to make a wider use of Ukrainian substantially exceeded the percentage of those who wanted to limit the use of Russian; 3) and conversely – more respondents supported the expansion of Russian than the restriction Ukrainian (Kulyk, 2008; Riabchuk, 2019, pp. 147–150). These results lead to the conclusion about certain language ideologies, in particular about prevailing language attitudes as a national symbol, rather than a tool of everyday usage (Riabchuk, 2019, p. 157). Textual and visual manifestations of the letter “і” from 1991 to February 2022 reflect an ambiguous attitude of the Ukrainian society towards the Ukrainian language. The language ideologies represented by this grapheme can be defined, on the one hand, as admiring the uniqueness of the Ukrainian language, pride, national-treasure attitude, sacralization, and, on the other hand, as a conviction about its weakness and endangerment.

Some of these language ideologies (uniqueness, pride, national-treasure attitude) may indicate the orientation of the liberated society to the promotion of their native culture, and the construction of identity based on national peculiarities. At the same time, the justification of the uniqueness of the Ukrainian language is based on the comparison with Russian, and a national-treasure attitude and sacralization seem to embody the offset of its inherent secondary state and non-prestige in the communication space. These elements generally align with the perspective of anticolonial thinking. At the same time, the metaphor of treasure and sacralization expresses the idea of its preservation, which can be interpreted as a protection from the influence, i.e., its “sealing” in the current state. This contradicts the idea of language development and, consequently, the idea of the possibility to satisfy all communicative needs of speakers, and that fact facilitates the Soviet narrative about the inferiority of the Ukrainian language and the limitation of its functions to domestic life, folklore, and fiction. In other words, the same language ideologies seem to reflect colonial thinking structures as well. The popularity of the language ideologies of weakness and endangerment, on the one hand, can be explained as a legacy of colonialism, but on the other hand, their continuity was encouraged by the real dominance of the Russian language in the public space even after 1991. These ideologies broadcast the narrative of preservation of the Ukrainian language, but not using and enhancing it, thus contributing to the preservation of the current situation.

Aforementioned Ivan Malkovych’s poem “The Village Teacher’s Encouragement”⁵ (1997), which is famous for its title “The little candle of the letter «І»”, played a remarkable part in reinforcing and sharing these language atti-

⁵ In Mark Andryczyk’s translation, the title reads “The Village Teacher’s Lesson”.

tudes. The image of the little candle that embodies the letter “ї” anchors associations of the Ukrainian language with fragility, vulnerability, and sacredness. The range of tender light of the і-candle is not large, even a child needs to defend it with their *tiny palms* to keep it burning. The strophe about the little candle of the letter «ї», as the whole poem in general, creates the impression of weakness and endangerment of the Ukrainian language. Language means are used for the verbalization of the image, in particular words such as *svichechka* ‘little candle’, *dolonky* ‘tiny palms’ that contain the diminutive suffixes make this association stronger. In this way, the image of “ї” as a tiny candle broadcasts the narrative of the necessity to defend the Ukrainian language as a condition of its maintenance.

This may not be the most essential of thing,
but you, o child,
you are called upon to defend with your tiny palms
the fragile little candle of the letter “ї”,

and also,
stretched out on your tiptoes,
to protect the small crescent moon
of the letter “C”,
which was carved out of the sky
along with a tiny bit of thread.

Because they say, o child,
that our language is like a nightingale’s song.

And they are right.

But remember,
that one day
the time may come,
when our language
will not be remembered
by even the smallest of nightingales.

That is why you cannot depend
only on nightingales
child⁶.

⁶ Translated by Mark Andryczyk. The White Chalk of Days: The Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series Anthology, edited by Mark Andryczyk, Boston 2017, p. 230.

The same language ideologies can be observed in the linguistic landscape of Ukraine, in particular, art objects in the form of the letter «ї». In 2013, in Rivne, in honour of International Mother Language Day (February 21), the highest shape of this letter was erected (Fig. 1). This sculpture was included in the “Book of Records of Ukraine”. In 2021, in Lanivtsi of the Ternopil region, in honour of the Day of Ukrainian Writing and Language (November 9), a metal monument of the letter “і” was installed (Fig. 2). It is an indicative fact that this art installation titled “The Ukrainian Language is Unique” was built in the town centre in the place of the former monument to “The first Komsomol members”, which was dismantled after the Law on Decommunization (adopted in 2015).



Figure 1.

<https://www.volynpost.com/news/11593-rekordnu-bukvu-i-postavyly-u-rivnomu-foto>



Figure 2.

https://lb.ua/culture/2021/11/10/498278_pamyatnik_literi_i_vstanovili.html

These embodiments of the letter “ї” in the linguistic landscape indicate some ambiguity. On the one hand, such actions could be interpreted as the manifestation of the anticolonial way of thinking, since the search for unique features of their own culture, exalting it to the level of the national treasure, is inherent to societies just liberated from colonial dependence as a result of colonial trauma caused by imperial assimilation and appropriation practices. On the other hand, a monument is an architectural construction that is installed in memory of a certain person who has already died or an event that has already taken place. In other words, any monument, regardless of whether it commemorates grief or celebrates an important event, conveys the concept of the past. Monuments that commemorate tragic events also embody the concepts of sorrow, loss, and death. Taking it into consideration, monuments to the letter “ї” can be interpreted as broadcasting the idea of the past of the Ukrainian language and the pride of this past. In particular, the practice of laying flowers (see Fig. 2), which is perhaps caused by the erasure of its essence in collective consciousness, reinforces the motif of longing for the past and also gives these monuments the symbolism of loss. The most controversial aspect of this fact is that there are no more official restrictions for using Ukrainian; it is an official language with all accompanying privileges. And in this context, the monuments to the letter “ї” broadcast the narrative about Ukrainian as an endangered, dead, or non-existent language that was cultivated during centuries by the Russian Empire in an explicit way and then by the Soviet Union in an implicit way. At first glance, these artworks attest a respectful attitude to the language, but also represent its reception through the colonizer’s lens, so they demonstrate the coloniality of thinking. In addition, they anchor the ideology of endangerment in the mind of Ukrainians.

Of interest here is the project «ї-map». In August 2016, Volodymyr Nakechnyi created a Facebook community “Ukrainian-speaking Kyiv” to unite those Kyiv citizens who are concerned about language assertion and to counteract the russification of the capital’s public discourse environment in a more organized manner. The statement about “priority of projects, initiatives, publications, etc., aimed not so much at the defence of the (weak) language, as at the **assertion of the (strong) language**” (<https://ukyiv.site/spilnota/> accessed 20.05.2025) was declared as one of the values of the community. In 2021, the community came up with the idea to create an interactive platform “The Map of Ukrainian-Speaking Kyiv”, whose aim was to mark all Kyivan establishments whose owners support the official position to use the Ukrainian

language only in customer service. After “Untypical Marketing Agency “Marketernia” joined this project, it broadened to creating a global worldwide service with the title «І-map». In such a way, the target audience of the project became wider, including the Ukrainian diaspora. The purpose of the map is worded in a list of points, the first one being quite illustrative:

Every Ukrainian-speaking citizen of any Ukrainian city can always find a place to enter **without a risk of language discrimination** (bold font – author) (<https://marketernia.agency/sotsium/i-mapa/> accessed 20.05.2025).

That is, in spite of the community’s declaring priorities (assertion of the strong language), its product (project «І-map») broadcasts the idea of weakness and endangerment of the Ukrainian language and recognition of the dominant status of the former metropole language.

This idea of endangerment facilitates the manipulative potential of the letter «ї». For instance, in 2020, the publishing house “Portal” published the children’s book “І. Special letter” written by Oksana Lushchevska. The abstract from the book goes

The words “Україна ‘Ukraine’” and “Київ ‘Kyiv’” are impossible without this letter. It is so special that it was under threat of being excluded from many words. The history of the letter І is the history of the Ukrainian language (Lushchevska, 2020).

The two final pages deal with the “interesting facts about the letter І”, two of which attract attention:

- 1) 1930s. The Soviet government that fought with every Ukrainian issue wanted to make the Ukrainian language closer to Russian. The letter І was eliminated from many words, for example *Eneїda*.
- 2) 1990s. The new edition of the Ukrainian Spelling Codex was adopted, and the inherent Ukrainian letters were returned to usage.

These passages make an impression of the ban on the letter «ї», that could hardly reflect the reality. Indeed, according to the first common for all Ukrainians, the Ukrainian Spelling Codex of 1929, «i» after vowels in borrowings should be replaced with «ї», for instance: *Eneїda, egoїсm, apxaїзм* (Ukrainskyi pravopys, 1929, p. 67). As is known, in 1933, this Spelling Codex was proclaimed as “bourgeois-nationalist” and was banned, instead, the new Spelling Codex was adopted. In the Ukrainian Spelling Codex of 1929, the aforementioned rule had been changed: «i» after vowels in borrowings should be repre-

sented with «i», for instance: *Енеїда, егоїзм, архаїчний* (Ukrainskyi pravopys, 1933, p. 62). But in the 1945-edition of the same Codex, the rule of 1929 was reestablished (Ukrainskyi pravopys, 1945, p. 105). As for the edition of 1990, it returned to the Ukrainian alphabet the letter «г», which was completely removed in 1933.

The case with the analysed book could exemplify M. Riabchuk's statement, that the liberated captive demonizes the Horde (Riabchuk, 2011, pp. 194–195). It is difficult to judge the author's aim or motives, but the result of such rather manipulative statements is treating the narrative about harassment, abuse, and long suffering of the Ukrainian language, in other words, the narrative of failure. In addition, such juggling with facts might levy studies on the colonial policy of the Bolsheviks in the cultural sphere and devalue pieces of evidence of the real practices concerning artificial remaking norms of the Ukrainian language in accordance with the norms of Russian.

The colonial ways of thinking can also be observed in the memes based on the letter “і” that had been shared on social media until 2022. One of the most popular is a combination of the picture of this letter in the centre of a warning road sign and the phrase “Caution. The Ukrainian language” (Fig. 3). Taking into consideration that the purpose of the warning road signs is to inform drivers about a dangerous road section and make them be ready to use additional safety measures this meme could be interpreted as an ironic warning for speakers to be ready to take extra efforts while communicating. On the one hand, this visual image ironizes the fact that communication in Ukrainian is something extraordinary for some citizens and requires additional attention and effort. But on the other hand, it also reflects the echoes of the Soviet narrative about the unnaturalness of the Ukrainian language in the public sphere.



Figure 3. <https://prikol.i.ua/view/476124/>



Figure 4. <https://uamodna.com/articles/pogovorymo-ale-e-odna-umova/>

One more remarkable case of the representation of language ideologies till 2022 is phrases like “Ukrainian is sexy”, “Ukrainian is tempting”, where the letter “І” is drawn as a woman’s silhouette, two dots of which symbolize the female breast (Fig. 4). This visualization seem to be an indication of the view on oneself through the lens of colonizer as it reflects typical colonial practice to feminize colonized nation, often resorting to portraying the country as an attractive woman (Thompson, p. 64; Shkandrii, 2023, p. 155). This image might also be influenced by the Soviet propaganda posters about the “friendship of nations”, on which Ukraine was portrayed as a woman, and by imperial and Soviet stereotypes about “pretty khokhlushkas”⁷.

Language ideologies of the femininity and sexuality of the Ukrainian language, as well as ideologies of the sanctity and endangerment, were also represented in the linguistic landscape of Ukraine. In particular, in 2016, the designer Sviatoslav Kobzenko created a clothes collection “Your language” for the brand «Fashion AID». The collection consisted of 5 T-shirts with a print in the centre of which includes a big letter or letter combination and one of the phrases: «Є – it’s sensual, your language», «ЙО – it’s fashion, your language», «Ї – it’s unique, your language», «ЇО – it’s soft, your language», «І – it’s blasting, your language». Fashion AID is a social brand that helps HIV-positive children. It positions itself as “stylish and explicit,” which “is not shy thinking and talking about sex” (<https://fashion-aid.in.ua/contact> accessed 20.05.2025). The title of the news about this event is also telling: ‘A collection of T-shirts about the sexuality of the Ukrainian language was presented in honour of the Day of Ukrainian Writing and Language’ (<https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2016/11/2/219707/> accessed 20.05.2025). There is one interesting detail that could also enhance the idea of sexuality of the Ukrainian language: the Ukrainian word *mova* ‘language’ is grammatically a feminine noun. On the one hand, the creation of this collection fixes the inherent Ukrainian society’s

⁷ “Khokhlushka” – a derogatory term used mostly by russians to address or talk about Ukrainian women and girls.

belief about femininity and sexuality of the Ukrainian language, and on the other hand, it is also a tool of spreading and embedding this language ideology. And taking into consideration the traditional association of femininity with weakness, this language attitude relates to a certain set “sanctity – endangerment – weakness”.

However, analysing the choice of the letters and letter combinations for these prints, attention should be paid to one more interesting detail, which also reveals the coloniality of thinking. «І», «е», and «г» are letters absent from the Russian alphabet, «ю» and «ъ» correspond to the phonetical realization of the Russian letter «ë» in different word positions. This choice must be motivated by the author’s aim to emphasize the peculiarities of the Ukrainian language, to highlight its uniqueness. But these peculiarities of the Ukrainian language have been established as a result of its comparison with Russian. This fact evidences the orientation on the language of the empire as a kind of standard and, accordingly, the perception of your own language as secondary. In such a way, this collection represents still existing in the Ukrainian society in that period the tendency to construct its own identity on the ground of comparison with Russian culture, that is, the former colonizer, the tendency to comprehend itself in the frame of dichotomy “colonizer–colonized”.

Overall, these outcomes indicate that language ideologies represented with the letter “і” during the period of 1991 – 2022, reflect the ambivalence of thinking that embraces anticolonial and colonial features simultaneously. On the one hand, widespread during this period, language ideologies of uniqueness, national-treasure attitude, and sacralization were determined to reject imperial and Soviet narratives about the inferiority, provincialism, and lack of prestige of the Ukrainian language, and on the other hand, were shaped within the dichotomy “Russian–Ukrainian”. The ideology of femininity explicitly broadcasted a colonial way of thinking, as it indicates a view of oneself from the colonizer’s perspective. Also, the preservation of a huge number of markers of the empire’s presence in the Ukrainian cultural space (primarily, the strong position of the Russian language) led to the persistence of ideologies of weakness and endangerment.

6. The letter “і” as a representation of language ideologies after the February 2022: anticolonial resistance and decolonization of minds

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the shifts in language ideologies of the Ukrainian society, deconstruction of the outlined above narratives, and

shaping of counter-discourse have occurred and are developing quite rapidly. The idea of resistance that appeared in the late Soviet period and was erased in the first decades after Ukraine proclaimed independence became the prevailing symbolic meaning of the letter «ї».

The language ideologies of femininity and sacristy fell under deconstruction first. The ideologies of masculinity and a pragmatic attitude towards the language (ability to meet any communicative needs (Garvin, 1993)) have taken their places. In the first weeks of the invasion, the post about the letter “ї” as a symbol of strength, where it is associated with male reproductive organs, became extremely popular:

And remember: the Ukrainian language is the only one that has the letter «ї»... such as... has two balls. Wishes to the Armed Forces of Ukraine: Fucking hit them! Glory to Ukraine! (see Fig. 5)

This image could be predestined by the idiom *maty yaytsia* ‘to have balls’, which means ‘to have courage/ to show bravery’. In a way, it might have also been a continuation of the already well-known at that point phrase by a Ukrainian border guard “Russian warship, go fuck yourself”, that had become a Ukrainians’ slogan of resistance during the first months of the full-scaled invasion.

One of the manifestations of the ideology of sacralisation of the Ukrainian language was the conviction of Ukrainians that it does not have obscene vocabulary, and that all these words are Russian in origin. The common representations of this attitude were widespread in the public discourse variants of the statement “Swear words make you moskal”. So, active use of obscene expressions, in particular the word *ibashhyt* ‘to fucking hit them’ pointing to Armed Forces’ of Ukraine actions towards occupants, can be treated as desacralization and inviolability of the Ukrainian language, changing its status from the iconography to weapons, that is, changing its function from symbolic to practical.

There are some facts that testify to the anchoring of this tendency. For instance, the online course “Movty. Motyvy” (“Мовити. Мотиви” ‘To speak. Motives’) (<https://bit.ly/4lkRXKZ> accessed 12.09.2025) was designed as a course in Ukrainian for everyday purposes. One more case is an “unconventional” textbook on “modern spoken Ukrainian” that includes an introduction to dialect means, obscenities, and contemporary memes and aphorisms. The cover of this textbook is illustrated with capital and small letters “ї” (Fig. 6), which seem to demonstrate a shift in language ideology of loyalty from a national-treasure attitude to a pragmatic one.

Later, this letter became a symbol of the resistance movement of the Ukrainian underground in the occupied territories of Kherson and then Mariupol. Participants of this movement drew the letter “ї” with chalk in public places or stuck posters with this letter up on the buildings where occupants were going to conduct so-called referendums. On some of these posters, the letter “ї” functions as an euphemism of the word ‘fuck’, for instance: “Russian war-referendum, go Ї yourself” (Fig. 7). The leader of the Kherson resistance movement explains the choice of this symbol like this:

...in summer, we decided to draw the letter «P»⁸ on the buildings where they were preparing pseudo-referendums. But the colleague from the communication agency suggested thinking of something unique. «Г»? «Є»? It would be funny. But the letter “ї” as a new symbol of resistance won everybody’s preferences. Then the movement “Mariupol is acting” accepted this letter as their symbol as well (<https://www.the-village.com.ua/village/city-city-experience/333237-zhovta-strichka-ta-litera-yi-interv-yu-z-koordinatorom-ruhu-oporu-v-hersoni> accessed 10.05.2025).



Figure 5.

⁸ “R” in English.



Figure 6. <https://www.facebook.com/EdEraUa/posts/pfbid028SSBKU89x9b3z5YCBbssP7StykcBsnJWskxDM4213nhT31VoNNfgKBa99xwf73fol>



Figure 7. https://lb.ua/society/2022/09/23/530364_okupanti_pogrozhyuyut_vibiti_dveri.html

The artists' visualisations of the new meanings of this letter reflect its subsequent rethinking. In particular, Nikita Titov created a series of posters where this letter broadcasts the motif of strength, rage, and resistance (dots in the form of clenched fists – Fig. 8), the defending strength (dots in the form of air defence missiles – Fig. 9), solidarity (Ukrainian flag in the form of the word “свої” ‘ours’ with clearly defined dots under “ї” – Fig. 10), and gratitude to the Armed Forces (dots in the form of heart with the sign “air defence” – Fig. 11)⁹.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.

⁹ All posters are from the Facebook page of Nikita Titov – <https://www.facebook.com/nikitavltitov>

The most remarkable shift in the language ideologies is the evolution of the letter “ї” image from a tiny candle (source of the light with a limited range of spreading) to an air defence system (a powerful defence tool with a wide range of spreading). It evidences a shift in the language attitude from the perception of the Ukrainian language as an object for defending to a tool of defence. If the image of the tiny candle broadcasts the idea about the necessity to defend the Ukrainian language, then the image of the air defence system disseminates the idea that the Ukrainian language is defending its speakers. This change is also reflected in the other works, for instance, Anastasia Ponomariova’s interpretation, showing this letter as a kozak holding two occupants’ skulls with two crossed sabres (Fig. 12), and Eld Roland’s picture shows servicemen holding a javelin in the shape of the letter “ї” (Fig. 13).

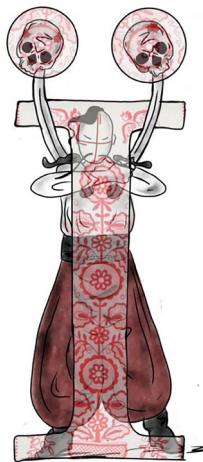


Figure 12. <https://v-variant.com.ua/mariupolski-khudozhyky-stvoryly-znak-ukrainskoho-sprotvyu-yi/>

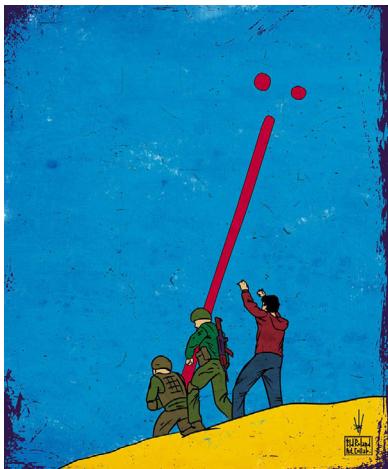


Figure 13. https://ag.com.ua/news/operativna-informaciya-z-regioniv-merezhi-aktivnoyi-gromadi-10092022_956/

During this period, the letter “ї” has acquired another symbolic meaning – ‘sovereignty’ – representing the shaping of a new linguistic ideology in Ukrainian society – the awareness of the Ukrainian language as an active factor in state-building and state-existential processes. The names of Ukrainian cities and towns written in the shape of Tryzub (Trident, the Coat of Arms of Ukraine – Fig. 14, 15) with the letter “ї” in its core can be examples of the visual representations of this language ideology.

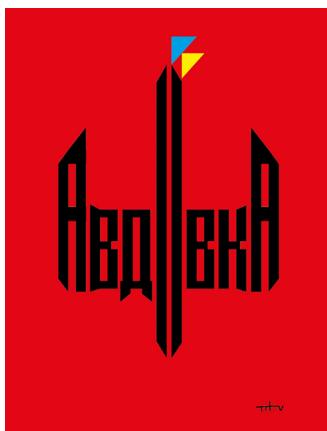


Figure 14. Nikita Titov

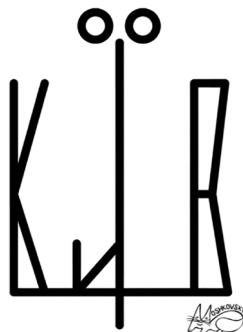


Figure 15. [https://wall31.com/t-shirts/ men-t-shirt/kiyiv/648](https://wall31.com/t-shirts-men-t-shirt/kiyiv/648)

It shows a drastic shift, especially in view of the fact that until February 2022, Ukrainian society had perceived the role of the language in state-building as something passive. The narrative “off the agenda” in relation to the language issue was quite popular even among patriotic citizens. Then, after the annexation of Crimea and the start of military aggression on the Donbas in 2014, the ideology of Ukraine’s bilingualism, represented by the slogan “Yedyna krayina. Yedinaia strana” (‘One Country’ in Ukrainian and Russian), was actively promoted. This slogan with the Ukrainian flag in the background had been the logo of Ukrainian national TV channels since March 2, 2014. Also, placed on billboards, it had become an element of the linguistic landscape in many Ukrainian cities. But after February 2022, Petro Poroshenko’s political campaign slogan “Army! Language! Faith!” was actualized; it got the status not just of a language attitude, but of a national idea.

It is interesting to compare representations of language ideologies on outfits before and after the full-scale invasion. If before 2022, the letter “I” on T-shirts symbolized femininity and sexuality, as mentioned in the previous section, then after 2022, it started representing strength, rage, and struggle with Russia. This letter is pictured with teeth on T-shirts, sweatshirts, and souvenir items (for instance, Fig. 16), especially a remarkable visualization, where it holds in its teeth the Russian letter “ë” (Fig. 17), and a print with two crossed letters as “a warning to those who dare to infringe upon our sovereignty”



Figure 16. <https://wall31.com/sweatshirts/sweatshirts-unisex/yi/727>



Figure 17. <https://wall31.com/t-shirts/men-t-shirt/zla-litera-yi/512>



Figure 18. <https://vozianov.design/yii-t-shirt/>

(<https://vozianov.design/yii-t-shirt/> accessed 10.05.2025, Fig. 18). This letter occurs on the products of some brands precisely as a sign of Mariupol's resistance and gains additional meaning of solidarity. In particular, in the autumn of 2022, the brand German Apparel and the YouTube show "Ebaut" ("Ебaut") released a charity collection "My blood" among whose key symbols is the letter "i" as a sign of resistance of the occupied cities (<https://germanapparel.com/>).

co/e-x-g-my-blood/ accessed 20.05.2025). In a similar way, the organization «Ukraiñer» offers an eco-bag with the “ї”-print, enabling Ukrainians, both at home and overseas, to express their national position in this way (<https://www.ukrainer.net/litera-i/> 20.05.2025).

Gradually, the image of the letter “ї” without stylisation and additional attributes on clothes, jewellery, passport covers, and even tattoos has become a means of demonstrating solidarity and belonging to the Ukrainian community. In this way, this letter becomes a representation of the prestige of both the Ukrainian language in particular and the Ukrainian people in general, assuming the status of a symbol of Ukrainian identity. This ideology is more fully represented in the name of a new Ukrainian brand of clothing “13th letter”¹⁰; whose creators explain the name as “ї is an identification of Ukraine with a proper address No 13 in the alphabet” (<https://www.instagram.com/13litera.ua/>). One more case of the representation of the ideology “language is a national identity” is a picture of a split letter “ї” on the cover of the first edition M. Tymoshyk’s book “Moscowization of Bukovyna (1940–1990)” (Fig. 19).



Figure 19. <https://bukvoid.com.ua/reviews/books/2024/03/14/174502.html>

Finally, outlining the shifts in language ideologies that took place after Russia’s full-scale invasion, it is worth noting the persistence of some of them. First of all, it is the ideology of uniqueness, which, however, has obtained some new meanings related to the struggle for its existence and the memory of

¹⁰ Registered on Instagram in April 2022.



Figure 20. <https://www.facebook.com/ochmanity/posts/pfbid0yT2tk4QS7QsMU7RJnYuWbCX2w2b7WLAYfjLGjw3A3KA6QRwQzwLHUHhgWhLDhEncl>

its past. Also, the set of words that are traditionally used to illustrate the symbolic meaning of this letter has become wider: next to the word *Ukaina*, appeared words *heroї* 'heroes' and *o. Zmiiniyi* 'Snake island'¹¹ (Fig. 20). An interesting representation of preserving the ideology of uniqueness is the variation of the motivating poster 'Keep Calm and Carry On' that, as known, was created by the British government to support the fighting spirit of their citizens before World War II began. In 2014, after Russia invaded Donbas, a remake of this poster – 'Keep Calm and Clean a Machine Gun' – became popular on Ukrainian social media. And in 2023, another variation of this poster became popular. It has a transparent allusion to Ivan Malkovich's poem: 'Keep Calm and a Tiny Candle of the letter «І»' and was created by Illia Strongovskiy in 2012 (Fig. 21). But till 2023 it was not actively shared in social media. Now



Figure 21. <https://www.volynnews.com/messages/1878/>

¹¹ Snake Island is an island in the Black Sea that marks Ukraine's territorial waters. On the 24th of February 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion started from some directions. Among the other actions, Russian troops came to this island and offered to surrender to Ukrainian border guards, but they received the answer: "Russian warship go fuck yourself". After fighting for some hours the aggressors captured the island. On the 4th of July 2022, after regular attacks Ukraine returned the island under its control.

this poster seems to reinterpret playfully and somewhat ironically the image of the candle as a symbol of the Ukrainian language and simultaneously represents it not as an object that needs defending, but as a symbol of the identity and a tool of resistance.

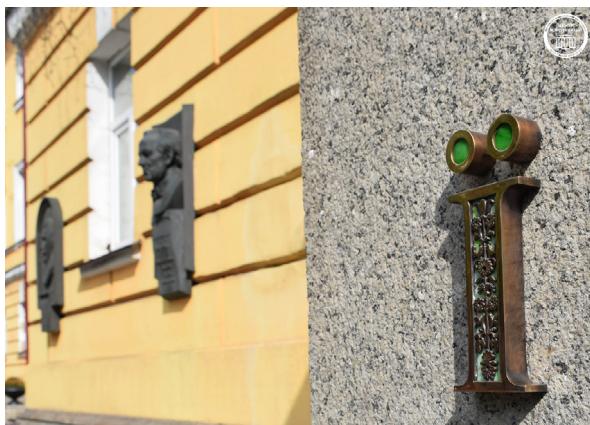


Figure 22. <https://knu.ua/news/12887>

This slightly updated ideology of uniqueness continues to be expressed in the linguistic landscape. In particular, in September 2022, the building of the Institute of Philology at Taras Shevchenko National University was adorned with a mini-sculpture in the shape of the letter “ї,” decorated with fragments of stained glass from the building’s windows that were destroyed during a missile strike on December 31, 2022. This mini-sculpture is part of the art project “Shukay” (“Шукай”/ Seek for), which aims to promote Kyiv’s history with mini-sculptures, which are city symbols, installed in different places of the capital and accompanied by plaques with QR-codes (<https://shukai.com.ua>). Besides the physical embodiment of the sculpture, two statements from the opening speech of the project author Yulia Bevzenko are meaningful:

- 1) ...the letter Ї is a real Ukrainian treasure since it is absent in the other Slavic alphabets. It distinguishes us from others, emphasizing our uniqueness. Modern Ukrainians mark with it various things – from clothing to street objects – outlining in such a way their identity and authenticity, which was under the risk of erasure for centuries.
- 2) If you think that the dots over the letter Ї resemble bullets, doubt not. Because language is indeed a weapon! (<https://knu.ua/ua/news/12887> accesed 20.05.2025).

To summarize shifts in language ideologies that have taken place after Russia's full-scale invasion, it is worth pointing out a crucial one – overcoming of demeaning stereotypes: weakness, endangerment, inferiority as a result of comparison with Russian as the standard. This letter now symbolizes masculinity, strength, and resistance. The uniqueness of the Ukrainian language has already been acknowledged not on the basis of comparison with Russian, but in a global context. It is possible to interpret this as self-reflection beyond the dichotomy “colonizer–colonized”. Also, a rethinking of the status of the Ukrainian language can be observed: its role in constructing identity and maintaining sovereignty is changing from symbolic to practical.

7. Conclusions

As numerous studies on societies with experience of colonial dependence show, coloniality does not disappear at the moment of liberation, but can continue for a long time, in particular due to the preservation of colonial practices and colonial way of thinking. This situation is often combined with the rejection of inherited imperial narratives and attempts to overcome the inferiority complex by constructing new ones, which can be described as postcolonial ambivalence. Ukrainian society also experienced this condition after declaring independence in 1991. And only Russia's full-scale invasion has caused substantial changes in public consciousness, dealing with overcoming social ambivalence and colonial thinking structures. One of the manifestations of this overcoming is shifts in language ideologies that have been traced on the example of the functioning of one of the symbols of the Ukrainian language, the letter «ї», in the discursive space.

Since Ukraine's independence, language ideologies have been characterised by a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, they reflect on searching and constructing the identity of the Ukrainian people by establishing the value of the Ukrainian language. But on the other hand, defining the uniqueness of the Ukrainian language through its comparison with Russian, its feminization attests the view of themselves from the colonizer's perspective. In that period, textual and visual images of the letter “ї” symbolized an attitude towards the language as a national treasure, sacralization, weakness, and endangerment. The main message broadcast by them was '*We must defend/keep the Ukrainian language*'. The indexical value of this letter encompassed the Ukrainian-speaking citizens who felt uncomfortable due to the limited

functional space of the Ukrainian language and even experienced linguistic victimization.

The full-scale invasion of Russia has become the catalyst for overcoming the colonial ways of thinking and postcolonial ambivalence. It is worth underlining that the Ukrainian experience does not fit into the classical chronological model of development, according to which colonized societies first engage in anticolonial resistance, liberating themselves from political dependence, then go through a postcolonial period, reflecting on the traumatic colonial experience, and finally transit to a decolonial state, having freed themselves from colonial practices and producing independent narratives directed towards the future. The peculiarity of the Ukrainian case is that although the decolonial state started after the postcolonial period, it is running parallel to anticolonial resistance – armed resistance to the threat of recolonization. This peculiarity is reflected in language ideologies.

First and foremost, the language ideologies of femininity, weakness, and endangerment undergo decline; replaced by polar opposites – masculinity, strength, and resistance. Also, the shift to desacralization is significant, which was especially noticeable in the first months of the full-scale invasion and manifested itself in the wide use of obscene language in private and public communicative spheres. These changes can evidence a definitive transition to an anticolonial mode of thinking. The rejection of the ideology of sacralization leads to shifts in the ideology of loyalty: the national-treasure attitude is changed to a pragmatic one (as a means of communication). This, in turn, promotes rethinking of the role of the Ukrainian language in preserving sovereignty: its use has already been realized as a prerequisite for identity. The main message broadcast by the textual and visual images of the letter “ї” after February 2022 is *‘The Ukrainian language defends us’*. Its indexical value of marginality has changed to the one of prestige: it has become a symbol of solidarity not for a limited group, but for all citizens of Ukraine. The language ideology of uniqueness, although preserved to this day, has acquired a somewhat different meaning: the authenticity of the Ukrainian language is represented not for comparison with Russian but on a wider scale. These shifts can testify to overcoming postcolonial ambivalence, departing from the cognitive frame ‘colonizer–colonized’, and transmitting to a decolonial mode of thinking. These changes testify to the overcoming of postcolonial ambivalence, the departure from the dichotomy of “colonizer-colonized,” and the transition to decolonial structures of thought.

Sources

Andryczyk, M. (Ed.). (2017). *The white chalk of days: The contemporary Ukrainian literature series anthology*. Academic Studies Press.

Lushchevska, O. (2025). *Ї. Osoblyva bukva*. Portal.

References

Azhniuk, B. (Ed.). (2024). *Mova i viina: dynamika movnoi systemy i movna polityka*. Vyadvnychiy dim Dmytra Buraho. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/15U-YyRkcAZmnFT-733IrcA0UgCNaHCCRX/view> [in Ukrainian].

Azhniuk, B. (2024). Semiotychne konstruuvannia publichnoho prostoru: viina i mova. In B. Azhniuk (Ed.), *Mova i viina: dynamika movnoi systemy i movna polityka* (pp. 88–122). Vyadvnychiy dim Dmytra Buraho. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/15U-YyRkcAZmnFT733IrcA0UgCNaHCCRX/view> [in Ukrainian].

Biedarieva, S. (n. d.). From the postcolonial condition to the decolonial option. *Ukrainian Decolonial Glossary*. <https://decolonialglossary.com.ua/from-the-postcolonial-condition-en>.

Blommaert, J. (2006). Language ideology. In K. Brown (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of language & linguistics* (2nd ed., pp. 510–522). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/03029-7>.

Cavanaugh, J. R. (2020). Language ideology revisited. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2020 (263), 51–57. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2020-2082>.

David, E. J. R., & Okazaki, S. (2006a). Colonial mentality: A review and recommendation for Filipino American psychology. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 12 (1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.12.1.1>.

David, E. J. R., & Okazaki, S. (2006b). The colonial mentality scale (CMS) for Filipino Americans: Scale construction and psychological implications. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53 (2), 241–252. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.53.2.241>.

Garvin, P. L. (1993). A conceptual framework for the study of language standardization. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 100/101, 37–54.

Gergało-Dąbek, N. (2023). Ukrainian Language as a Symbol of Resistance Against the Invasion of the Russian Federation. *Wiedza Obronna*, 285 (4). <https://doi.org/10.34752/2023-c285>.

Grosfoguel, R. (2006). World-systems analysis in the context of transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 29 (2), 167–187. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40241659>.

Kassymbekova, B., & Chokobaeva, A. (2023, July 5). Expropriation, assimilation, elimination: Understanding Soviet settler colonialism. *South-South Movement*. <https://www.southsouthmovement.org/dialogues/expropriation-assimilation-elimination-understanding-soviet-settler-colonialism>.

Kiss, N., & Wingender, M. (Eds.). (2025). *Contested language diversity in wartime Ukraine: National minorities, language biographies, and linguistic landscape*. Ibidem-Verlag.

Kosmeda, T. (2020). "Dukh" litery, abo bukva – pershoelement linhvokultury: vidkryta lektsiia. Drukarnia "Ruta" [in Ukrainian].

Kosmeda, T., & Sobol, O. S. (2018). Suchasna ukrainska linhvohrafia: terminolohichne pole. *Studia Ukrainica Posnaniensia*, 6, 61–71. <https://doi.org/10.14746/sup.2018.6.07> [in Ukrainian].

Kotliar, O. (n. d.). Colonialism and coloniality. *Decolonial Glossary*. <https://decolonial-glossary.com.ua/colonialism-and-coloniality-en>.

Kravchenko, Y., & Shkandrij, M. (n. d.). Anticolonial, postcolonial, decolonial. *Decolonial Glossary*. <https://decolonialglossary.com.ua/decolonialanti-colonialpostcolonial-en>.

Kulyk, V. (2007). Movni ideolohii v ukrainskomu mediinomu dyskursi. *Naukovi zapysky Instytutu politychnych i etnonacionalnykh doslidzhen*, 33, 321–338. <http://jnas.nbu.gov.ua/article/UJRN-0001118185> [in Ukrainian].

Kulyk, V. (2008). Movna polityka ta suspilni nastavky shchodo neyi pislia Pomaranchevoi revoliutsii. In J. Besters-Dil'her (Ed.), *Movna polityka ta movna sytuatsiia v Ukrainsi: Analiz i rekomendatsii* (pp. 11–54). Vydavnychyi dim "Kyievo-Mohylianska akademiia" [in Ukrainian].

Kulyk, V. (2010). *Dyskurs ukraiinskych medii: identychnosti, ideolohii, vladni stosunkiy. Krytyka* [in Ukrainian].

Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16 (1), 23–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X970161002>.

LRT English. (2023, September 22). Russia's war in Ukraine will be seen as colonial war – Interview with Timothy Snyder. LRT. <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2128983-russia-s-war-in-ukraine-will-be-seen-as-colonial-war-interview-with-timothy-snyder>.

Lysiak-Rudnytskyi, I. (2019). Rusifikatsiia chy malorosiiianizatsiia? In *Istorychni ese* (Vol. 2, pp. 514–520). Dukh i Litera [in Ukrainian].

Malaniuk, Ye. (1952). *Malorosiistvo*. Published by "Visnyk" ODFFU [in Ukrainian].

Mellino, M. (2018). Postcolonialism. In H. Callan (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2344>.

Mignolo, W. D. (2005). *Prophets Facing Sidewise: The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference*. *Social Epistemology*, 19 (1), 111–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691720500084325>.

Mignolo, W. D. (2007). Introduction: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking. *Cultural Studies*, 21 (2–3), 155–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162498>.

Mignolo, W. D. (2009). Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26 (7–8), 159–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>.

Moore, D. C. (2001). Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique. *PMLA*, 116 (1), 111–128. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/463645>.

Pavlyshyn, M. (1997). Kozaky v Yamaytsi: Postkolonialni rysy v suchasni ukrayinskii kulturi. In M. Pavlyshyn, *Kanon ta ikonostas* (pp. 223–236). Vydavnystvo "Chas" [in Ukrainian].

Pavlyshyn, M., & Tsymbalyuk, D. (2023, July 5). Interview between Marko Pavlyshyn and Darya Tsymbalyuk on the past and present of postcolonial debates in Ukraine. *South-South Movement*. <https://www.southsouthmovement.org/dialogues/interview-between-marko-pavlyshyn-and-darya-tsymbalyuk-on-the-past-and-present-of-postcolonial-debates-in-ukraine>.

Quijano, A. (2007). Coloniality and modernity/rationality. *Cultural Studies*, 21 (2–3), 168–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353>.

Rating Group Ukraine. (2022, March 19). The sixth national poll: The language issue in Ukraine. https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/language_issue_in_ukraine_march_19th_2022.html.

Riabchuk, M. (2000). Vid “Malorosii” do “Indoievropy”: ukrainski avtostereotypy. In *Vid Malorosii do Ukrayny: paradoksy zapizniloho natsievtvorennia* (pp. 194–219). Krytyka [in Ukrainian].

Riabchuk, M. (2011). *Postkolonialnyi syndrom: sposterezhennia*. K.I.S. [in Ukrainian].

Riabchuk, M. (2019). *Dolannia ambivalentnosti. Dykhotozia ukrainskoi natsionalnoi identychnosti – istorychni prychyny ta politychni naslidky*. IPIEND im. I. F. Kurasa NAN Ukrayny [in Ukrainian].

Riabczuk, M. (2013). Colonialism in another way: On the applicability of postcolonial methodology for the study of postcommunist Europe. *Porównania*, 13, 47–59. <https://doi.org/10.14746/p.2013.13.10972>.

Scollon, R., & Wong Scollon, S. (2003). *Discourses in place: Language in the material world* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203422724>.

Shkandrii, M. (2023). *V obiimakh imperii. Literatura y imperskyi dyskurs vid napoleonivs’koi do postkolonialnoi doby*. Komubuk [in Ukrainian].

Shohamy, E., & Waksman, S. (2009). Linguistic landscape as an ecological arena: Modalities, meaning, negotiation, education. In E. Shohamy & D. Gorter (Eds.), *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery* (pp. 313–331). Routledge.

Shumytska, H. & Kruglov, A. (Eds.). (2025). *Languages and cultures in times of war*. Research Centre for Sociology of Language.

Solchanyk, R. (1992). Little Russianism and the Ukrainian-Russian relationship. In *Ukraine: From Chernobyl to sovereignty* (pp. 19–20). Macmillan.

Tompson, E. (2023). *Trubadury imperii. Rosiiska literatura i kolonializm*. Nash format [in Ukrainian].

Ukrainskyi pravopys. (1929). Kyiv. <http://irbis-nbuv.gov.ua/ulib/item/UKR0009938> [in Ukrainian].

Ukrainskyi pravopys. (1933). Kharkiv. <http://irbis-nbuv.gov.ua/ulib/item/ukr0009919> [in Ukrainian].

Ukrainskyi pravopys. (1945). Kyiv. <http://irbis-nbuv.gov.ua/ulib/item/UKR0010302> [in Ukrainian].

Wodak, R. (2001). The discourse historical approach. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 87–121). Sage.

Woolard, K. A. (2020). Language ideology. In J. Stanlaw (Ed.), *The International encyclopedia of linguistic anthropology* (1st ed., pp. 1–21). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118786093.iela0217>.

Yasakova, N. (2024). Leksema “maloros” v imperskomu i antykolonialnomu dyskursakh. *Lingvistichni studii*, 48, 96–109. <https://doi.org/10.31558/1815-3070.2024.48.8> [in Ukrainian].

Yavorska, G. (2010). The impact of ideologies on the standardization of modern Ukrainian. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2010 (201). <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2010.008>.

Acknowledgment: The author wishes to thank Heiko Pääbo, the discussant of the panel session of the Ninth Annual Tartu Conference on East European and Eurasian Studies “Resilience and Adaptation in Times of Adversity” (11–13 June 2025), where the results of this research were presented, and the anonymous reviewers for the constructive comments, which have improved the quality of this manuscript. Secondly, the author wishes to thank the Centre for Interdisciplinary Ukrainian Studies “Think Space Ukraine” at the University of Regensburg for partial financial support. Finally and importantly, the author expresses her gratitude to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, who, defending the existence of Ukraine every day, have made conducting this research possible and have facilitated the appearance of empirical material for it.

Submitted: 28.06.2025

Accepted: 15.09.2025



Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0)