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Slavist Yuri Shevchuk on conventional and new scenarios of assimilation, Russification and a pretense statehood

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In late May, Yuri Shevchuk, a well-known Slavist, lecturer in Ukrainian at Columbia University and Harvard Summer School, and the founder of Ukrainian Film Club at Columbia University, currently the only permanent forum for Ukrainian films in North America, delivered open lectures on, 'Russification in Ukraine: Traditions and Innovations', at Lviv and Kyiv 'Ye' Bookstores under the 'New Trends: Society, Politics and Culture' project. During his visit to Ukraine, Mr. Shevchuk found the time to talk to The Ukrainian Week.

IMPERIALISTIC HERITAGE

U.W.: Why, after the USSR collapsed, is Ukraine still undergoing the forced imposition of the Russian language as a dividing element? This is not happening in other post-soviet republics, other than maybe Belarus.

I would add Kazakhstan to Ukraine and Belarus. It also has a huge problem of Russified culture, language and mindset. The imperialistic policy has been so successful in Ukraine and a failure in virtually all other FSU countries for a number of reasons. Firstly, Ukraine spent much more time under Russian occupation and its assimilation policy was implemented on a massive scale, consistently and often violently. Secondly, Ukraine lacks a strong national elite with enough economic importance to conduct a cultural and language policy of its own, unlike Poland. Thirdly, the myth about how much Ukrainian and Belarusian language, civilization and mindset have in common with those of Russia was always widely promoted until it was so deeply entrenched in local's minds it undermined the ability to resist the expansion.

Russian imperialism used assimilation tools against the Ukrainian language that would never have worked with Baltic and Caucasian languages. Yuri Sheveliov called them the 'tools of internal pressure' on the language that penetrate its system, syntax, phonetics and vocabulary which is the least resistant to assimilation processes. He qualified the intrusion as the original invention of Russian imperialism. Great Britain, Spain or France had never thought of undermining the languages of nations they colonized from inside.

Russian imperialists are extremely effective at this, causing some far-reaching impacts. One is making many Ukrainians believe that their language is just a distorted, unoriginal and poor copy of the Russian language.

U.W.: What are the most popular scenarios of cultural and language assimilation in the old empires: Great Britain, Spain and France? How similar is the Russian model?

External pressures on languages, including first and foremost bans and punishment for using the language. This is followed by the shaping of a cultural and language environment where symbolic capital accumulates on the basis of the dominating language alone. Knowing and speaking the language of the metropolis opened ways to join the empire, get in the game and have career growth (this was typical in British India). No empire can survive without involving members of the colonized community in the mechanisms of oppression, control and governance on a massive scale, because the dominant nation has no sufficient human resources to put administrators everywhere. With Ukraine, the tools of external pressure were identical to those used in Algeria or Morocco, by the French, or South Africa and India by the British.

U.W.: Has Russian linguistic imperialism evolved with time? What particular features did it develop in the 21st century?

Russifiers are definitely inventive as they keep adjusting the tools of assimilation and Russification to the situation in Ukraine, which has changed drastically. In 1989, the Ukrainian SSR passed the law on languages that required bureaucrats to learn Ukrainian over the next 10 years. This never happened because pretense independence evolved instead, accompanied by a pretense language policy and pretense state. It had all the necessary attributes, including the national anthem, colours, bureaucrats, president and the army, yet it was essentially ruled by Kravchuk and Kuchma, the old red communists. Red directors see this culture and the statehood idea as something deeply hostile and alien, not just strange. What they suddenly realized, though, was that they could get windfall profits from this.

All Western policy analysts I have heard or read said that the Ukrainian political elite lacks the ability to think in terms of the state and has zero ambition to leave something other than the statistics of their personal enrichment in history. These are its two key features and typical for each and every Ukrainian president.

LANGUAGE QUASI-POLICY

U.W.: How does the world see bilingualism? Why is Ukrainian bilingualism that you call 'Schizophrenia' dangerous for the nation?

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is the only nation that doesn't care what language it speaks. Yet, it matters everywhere else in the world, including Russia. And we are imposed a sort of pervert internationalism based on the wrong idea that the language does not matter. The spin

doctors of this fake internationalism which is, in fact, the concept of Moscow's superiority, feed us with slogans, such as "I like any language as long as it's Russian." Bilingualism is pure assimilation, a way of speaking just one language, and Russification in the case of Ukraine. We're being imposed what I and many others call language Schizophrenia, whereby Ukrainians hear people speak Ukrainian, and other languages, chaotically within just one minute of a TV show. As a result, each language spoken is primitive and poor. The host, who is a native speaker of Russian, speaks it naturally, while Russian-speaking hosts who speak Ukrainian on TV look like they are turning their brain inside out trying to translate their Russian language thoughts into Ukrainian. The result is a hybrid, a simulacrum that disgusts and repulses the mass of the audience, rather than appeals to it. That is the policy russifiers pursue on Ukrainian TV and radio. Actually, they are brilliant at it. Notably, people who would hardly qualify as cultural cannibals participate in this Schizophrenia enthusiastically. They are the nation's leading writers and intellectuals who agree to being spoken to in Russian on Ukrainian media. I must say that in other places where the languages of colonizers and the colonized are in tight contact with each other, such as Puerto-Rico, Catalonia or Quebec, have no language Schizophrenia policy. In dialogues with people who don't speak Spanish, Catalan or Quebec French respectively, their speech is dubbed into the language spoken on the show.

The language Schizophrenia imposed on the entire country, including the regions where less than 5% of the population speaks Russian, leaves no Ukrainian-language space for native speakers of Ukrainian. The language grows anemic when its native speakers can no longer think in that language alone, as they do in any community that has language freedom. With time, they lose the ability to create their native, not translated, original neologisms and slang, or generate their trendy spoken language, juicy, appealing, exotic and unique. Yuri Sheveliov once wrote that a language without slang is doomed to die because slang is the zone in every language that generates new blood. Lesia Stavytska's dictionary of Ukrainian slang has 70-80% of words borrowed or translated from Russian. Ukrainians have no native slang that is as rich as that of Poles, Russians or Brits. In a situation where the nation's government conducts a Ukrainophobic and Russification policy in all areas of life, there is no language doctrine to resist this policy effectively on the scale of civil society and its cells, such as the media, to create the Ukrainian-language environment that no assimilation could break through. Ukrainian media fails to catch new words from playgrounds, colleges and schools, and turn them into commonly used language, unlike elsewhere in the world. I know no TV or radio channel that offers a purely Ukrainian-language product.

U.W.: What is the difference in the policy of using a titular nation's language in strategic areas, such as the media, the internet and books, which differs dramatically in Ukraine and the rest of the world?

The policy in the West has reached the point where the state no longer needs any mechanisms of implementation, control, encouragement or sanctions for incompletion. The USA has no law on languages and no provision of the Constitution declares English as the official state language. Yet, it feels reasonable in the state to not want to undermine its strategic role in public life or the web because these two aspects of a language affect each other. No one would think of placing an ad or a banner in French on an English-language website. People just realize that it's counterproductive.

MAKE IT INTERESTING

U.W.: We often hear that Ukrainian studies are in a state of decline in the world right now. How true is that?

Definitely, Ukrainian studies in the West are not as important as they are in Ukraine, even though Ukraine is in Europe and the world. They are in a decline. France does not have much related to Ukrainian studies. It has no institutionalized research centers at its leading universities, such as Sorbonne and the like. Slavic studies in France still focus on Russian studies in the old imperialistic sense, wiping other cultures, including Ukraine's, out of the interest field. The problem is not as much in the French vision of the Russian language as the first Slavic language, as it is in the outcome of this exceptional attention to it that leaves all other languages behind and fuels no interest in them whatsoever. In this environment, Ukrainian studies are pushed to the sidelines, even though we're talking of a 45-million strong nation in the country itself, plus another 10-15 million people elsewhere.

Moreover, the latest political developments do not help promote Ukrainian studies and Ukrainians in the world. This is not just about the lack of financial support. Students who opt to major in Ukrainian studies find no moral or cultural support in anything that would signal Ukraine's growing importance and prospects in science, diplomacy or business careers for young people.

Another aspect that tends to dilute the role of Ukrainian studies is the field of studies articulated to present Ukrainians and their struggle for independence as fascism and anti-Semitism. Some historians and writers in the West, including those of Ukrainian origin, who write on Ukrainian issues, oppose the study of 'Holodomor', the Famine. They claim that it cannot be compared to the Holocaust because this comparison makes the latter look trivial. This concept in Ukrainian studies has much in common with the propaganda against the Ukrainian Diaspora in the West, which was intensely promoted by soviet special services, where the Ukrainian guerilla movement, the Insurgent Army or UPA, as well as any other ways of the nation's self-organization which were unauthorized by the Kremlin, were portrayed as fascist, anti-Semitic, anti-national and traitor-like activities.

Yuri Shevchuk earned his PhD in Germanic Philology at Taras Shevchenko National University in 1987. He has been lecturing in Ukrainian at Columbia University since 2004 and Harvard Summer School since 1990. He is member of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies; the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages; Shevchenko Scientific Society; Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences, and the National Society of Cinematographers of Ukraine. Mr. Shevchuk promotes Ukrainian cinematography and culture in North America and Europe. He compiled *Beginner's Ukrainian* (Hippocrene Books, Inc. New York, 2011), the latest interactive textbook for American universities.

(The Ukrainian Independent NewsMagazine).