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Codeswitching in Ukrainian Media: Social Meaning of Ukrainian-Russian Bilingualism in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary Ukraine, the linguistic landscape reflects a complex interplay between Ukrainian and Russian, influenced by historical policies, geography, social identities, and current political dynamics. Through the analysis of Mykhailo Podolyak, Yulia Tymoshenko, and Roman Svitan, this study illuminates various facets of bilingualism, code-switching, and language interference. Podolyak exemplifies "elite bilingualism," blending languages seamlessly in formal contexts, contrasting with Tymoshenko's politically motivated acquisition of Ukrainian, marked by pronounced structural borrowings from Russian. Svitan's bilingual media discourse underscores Ukraine's pragmatic bidialectalism, where language choice reflects both personal identity and societal norms. Beyond political elites, the prevalence of Surzhyk highlights a broader sociolinguistic reality, blurring distinctions between Ukrainian standards and hybrid forms. Zelensky's linguistic transition symbolizes Ukraine's evolving national identity, affirming Ukrainian as the predominant state language amid persistent Russian influence in private, media, and regional domains. This fluid diglossic environment redefines bilingual norms, emphasizing language use as a nuanced marker of identity and political allegiance in post-2014 Ukraine.

Keywords: Ukrainian Language, Bilingualism, Media.

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1. Bilingualism in Ukraine: Code-switching and identity in Ukrainian media discourse

The structure of this article is as follows: I will first provide background information by briefly discussing the history of interaction between Ukrainian and Russian in Ukraine. Subsequently, I will address the pre-war language situation in Ukraine, including the distribution of Ukrainian, Russian, and Surzhyk and provide some theory for my analysis. Lastly, I will conduct an analysis of codeswitching in the media at the present time and propose some conclusions.

Methodology: The video materials were selected from current YouTube videos to obtain recent samples. After reviewing dozens of options, the decision was made to limit the samples to four categories: a well-known, fluent bilingual Ukrainian-Russian speaker, a politician who is a native Russian

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speaker and learned Ukrainian as an adult, a Ukrainian-speaking journalist interviewing a Russian-speaking expert, and a street poll conducted in a typical town in Central Ukraine with non-professional respondents. While YouTube often provides transcriptions, Ukrainian-language transcriptions are frequently unavailable.

2. Russian language in Ukraine

It is challenging to fully explore the complex topic of the history of the Russian Language in Ukraine in a brief introduction. Instead, I aim to outline the most significant historical events in a rough chronological order to provide context for the current study. I acknowledge that interpretations may vary, and I welcome scholarly discussions on this matter.

Much of the influential research on bilingualism, both in general and specific contexts, is closely intertwined with political and historical developments. For instance, Mackey (1972, 1980) framed bilingualism in French-speaking Canada as a political issue to highlight the complex attitudes towards the languages and their speakers. Similarly, there are parallels can be drawn with other areas in the world, where multiple languages coexist, often due to historical colonization or geographic proximity to other linguistic regions (Catalan and Spanish in Spain, Basque and Spanish in Spain, Dutch and French in Belgium, Finnish and Swedish in Finland, etc.)

Historically, Russian settlers first appeared in what is now Ukrainian territory in the late 16th century, particularly in Slobozhanshyna (now northeastern Ukraine) (Subtelny, 2000, p. 149). A century later, following the Pereyaslav Rada of 1654 led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the Ukrainian Cossack Hetmanate aligned with the Tsardom of Russia, seeking Russian military protection against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Despite initial autonomy, this union eventually led to the full incorporation of the Hetmanate into the Russian state, prompting further migration of Russians into central Ukraine (Subtelny, 2000, p. 149).

The 19th-century industrial revolution further spurred Russian migration to Ukrainian urban centers, establishing a predominantly Russian-speaking environment. By the early 20th century, ethnic Russians constituted the majority in many Ukrainian cities, ranging from 34% in Yelisavetgrad (now Kropyvnytskyi) to 68% in Luhansk. Even in Kyiv, Russians accounted for over 54% of the population, shaping a Russian-speaking milieu (Dnistrianskyi, 2006, p. 342).

The Russian government actively promoted the Russian language for administrative convenience and to counter Ukrainian separatism, evident in laws such as the 1863 ban on Ukrainian religious and educational texts and the 1876 prohibition of Ukrainian language books and public performances (Magocsi, 1996).

Following the 1917 revolutions, while the Soviet Union officially did not designate a state language, Russian enjoyed privileged status as a "language of interethnic communication," marginalizing Ukrainian as a rural or less educated language (Liber, 1992, pp. 12-13). Despite Ukraine's independence in 1991, Russian remained prevalent, particularly in eastern and central regions, while western Ukraine maintained a stronger Ukrainian-speaking tradition (Zbruch, 2023). Amidst ongoing political tensions, particularly exacerbated by the 2022 Russian invasion, the language landscape has shifted. Ukrainian has seen a resurgence, catalyzed by patriotic sentiments and efforts to counter Russian influence (Zbruch, 2023).

3. Current linguistic situation in Ukraine

The linguistic situation in Ukraine is complex, with anecdotal evidence suggesting varying degrees of language proficiency and identity. The debate ranges from advocating for a monolingual Ukrainian public sphere to supporting bilingualism or multilingualism. An intriguing similar phenomenon observed in Ukraine but also globally is semilingualism—a condition in which a speaker lacks sufficient proficiency in either language to sustain advanced conversation or produce grammatically correct written communication in one language. While this may appear as linguistic deficiency, contemporary linguists caution against evaluating bilingual competence through the lens of native-like mastery. Unlike Chomsky's concept of the idealized native speaker, modern scholars emphasize the functional and contextual use of language over symmetrical fluency. As Milroy and Muysken note, bilingualism should be understood not as perfect parallel competence but as the ability to navigate and switch between

languages effectively depending on social and communicative context (Milroy and Muysken, *One Speaker, Two Languages*, 3; Gumperz 1972, 1982).

John Gumperz, in his influential work on bilingual strategies, also argues that bilinguals' code-switching does not indicate linguistic deficiency or a grammarless amalgam of two languages. Rather, he conceptualizes it as a communicative advantage—an additional resource that gives speakers a wider range of expressive tools (Gumperz 1972, 1982a).

4. Bilingualism in Ukraine

As already mentioned, the vast majority of Ukrainians are Ukrainian-Russian bilinguals. While bilingualism is a well-established field in modern linguistics, there remains no universally accepted definition. Bloomfield (1933: 56) defined it as native-like control of two languages, whereas Haughen (1953: 7) posited that bilingualism simply involves the ability to produce complete, meaningful utterances in a second language. Fabbro (1999: 103) expands the concept to include mastery of two dialects or a language and a dialect. Suzanne Romaine (1995: 39) views bilingualism as a form of linguistic and cultural transition. Cummins (1979) proposed an idealized model of bilingual competence based on perfect knowledge of both languages. However, in practice, bilingual individuals tend to use their languages in different social contexts and are not expected to have equal proficiency across all domains.

As previously discussed, most Ukrainians are bilingual at least to some extent, due to a significant exposure to the Russian language. This remains the case despite the recent governmental efforts to restrict its use in Ukraine through measures such as mandating the use of Ukrainian in all government and public spheres and Russian continues to be widely accessible in post-independence Ukraine through the internet and mass media. For example, as of 2025, Wikipedia hosts approximately 2 million articles in Russian, compared to only about 1.3 million in Ukrainian. Until 2022, the majority of Ukrainian series were produced in Russian and Ukrainian singers sang in Russian too. Mostly, the reason was the much bigger Russian market with its 140 million population vs 40 million in Ukraine. Currently, there is an attempt to dub all these popular series and, based on the comment on YouTube for example, Ukrainians are happy to watch their own films in their native language. Also, most Ukrainian singers started singing in Ukrainian (Danilko, Potap and Nastya, etc.), again making some Russians unhappy. There are also some that left Ukraine and keep singing in Russian – in Moscow (Povalii, for example). Occasionally, there is a complaint from a Russian viewer that now they don't understand their favorite series or the lyrics in a song. Because of the previous prevalence of Russian, Russian has been maintained—sometimes out of necessity—by bilingual Ukrainians, and lexical borrowings are still frequent. In a neutral situation, lexical borrowing is often cited as the most common type of language change resulting from language contact. Such borrowings typically enrich the language without fundamentally altering its structure (Hock, 1996). In a situation where Ukraine is fighting against the Russian aggression, the attempt to get rid of the borrowings is clearly politically motivated, but is also necessary to maintain Ukrainian as a national language of Ukraine.

5. Code-switching

Bilingual identity leads directly to the topic of code-switching. Code-switching is a central aspect of bilingualism and is considered a natural phenomenon in interactions between bilingual speakers. Often, speakers are not consciously aware that they are code-switching. Nevertheless, the practice serves important social and communicative functions. In any multilingual society, individuals code-switch to enhance clarity, emphasize meaning, or connect with particular audiences.

Over the past two decades, numerous studies have proposed syntactic frameworks to account for code-switching. Many researchers have introduced structural constraints specific to code-switching (Belazi, Rubin, & Toribio, 1994; Halmari, 1997; Joshi, 1985; Myers-Scotton, 1993; Pfaff, 1979; Sankoff & Poplack, 1981). Others have appealed to universal syntactic principles to explain intra-utterance switches (Bentahila & Davies, 1986; Mahootian, 1993, 1996, 1999; Woolford, 1983), including switching within words. Across these approaches, one key point of agreement is that mixed utterances are generated by a rule-governed system that recognizes two distinct linguistic inputs.

Some scholars view code-switching as an expressive asset that allows speakers to convey meaning more precisely, while others argue that excessive or uncontrolled switching can undermine linguistic integrity. In fields such as speech-language pathology, the type and frequency of code-switching are sometimes used as indicators of relative language proficiency. In general, code-switching enhances both the clarity and emotional depth of communication. However, when it becomes excessive or unregulated—particularly when the speaker lacks conscious control or misjudges their audience—it may hinder effective communication. In such cases, code-switching can be viewed not as an asset, but as a communicative deficit. Weinreich (1953: 73–74) described code-switching as the alternation between two distinct linguistic systems. In his view, an ideal bilingual speaker switches languages only when the social context shifts—such as a change in topic or interlocutor—and not within a single, uninterrupted context or sentence. Any insertion of foreign-language material should be clearly marked, either through quotation (in writing) or prosodic cues like pauses or intonation shifts (in speech).

Poplack (1980) identified two grammatical constraints on code-switching:

1. The free morpheme constraint, which posits that switches cannot occur between a bound morpheme and a free morpheme unless the latter has been phonologically integrated into the language of the former.
2. The equivalence constraint, which holds that a switch is possible only when the word orders on either side of the switch point are congruent in both languages.

The occurrence and nature of code-switching depend heavily on the surrounding community and the social norms governing language use. In some communities, intra-sentential switching is entirely acceptable; in others, it is strongly discouraged. Moreover, bilingual speakers often assign distinct emotional and social values to their languages. They may use each language in different domains—home, school, work, or public life—without developing equal proficiency in both. Thus, it is crucial to examine code-switching within its proper linguistic, social, and cultural context. Chana and Romaine (1984) argue that code-switching is especially prevalent in communities undergoing rapid linguistic or social change, where group boundaries are blurring and traditional linguistic norms are being renegotiated. This description aptly fits the contemporary situation in Ukraine, where society is seeking to distance itself from Russian influence, purge Surzhyk, and simultaneously accommodate Russian-speaking Ukrainians. The relationship between language and identity has long been recognized (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Carbaugh, 1996; Gumperz, 1982; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Tabouret-Keller, 1997). Language both reflects and constructs social identity. In bilingual communities, this relationship becomes more complex, particularly when the languages and associated cultural or ethnic identities used to carry unequal social prestige, as was the case in Ukraine or divide people into patriots or Russia supporters, as is currently oftentimes the case.

6. Language choice vs code-switching

Let's now briefly consider Language Choice vs. Code-Switching. Closely related to code-switching is the concept of language choice. For the purposes of this study, code-switching refers to the use by bilingual speakers of two or more languages within the same conversation. Switching can occur between different speakers' turns, between sentences within a single turn, or even within a single sentence. These forms are commonly referred to as inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag-switching, respectively (Milroy, 1995: 7). Backus and Eversteijn (2002) emphasize the difficulty in clearly distinguishing between language choice and code-switching. They propose the following definitions: "It may be justified to define language choice as what speakers do when deciding in which language to conduct a conversation and code-switching as alternating between languages within a conversation" (p. 14). In my analysis of Ukrainian speech, I make a distinction between conscious switches—which often serve a clear communicative or stylistic function—and unconscious insertions, particularly of Russian-origin terms, which reflect entrenched bilingual habits. It is important to note that conscious switching is typically a privilege of highly proficient bilinguals and presumes a bilingual audience. As previously discussed, this is a reasonable assumption in the Ukrainian context.

Since language choice is intentional and strategic, it carries social meaning. A bilingual speaker generally has three options: use of the first language only, use of the second language only, or use of a

mixed code. Each choice carries its own set of sociopragmatic functions (Backus & Eversteijn, 2002; Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Kachru, 1982; Mahootian, 2000, 2002).

According to Bell's theory of audience design, "speakers accommodate primarily to their addressee" (1984, p. 145). Ukrainian bilinguals will often switch to Russian when addressing Russians or mixed-language groups. Conversely, using only Ukrainian may result in misunderstandings if the audience includes monolingual Russian speakers. In such cases, speakers may strategically include Ukrainian words when speaking Russian, provided those words are either mutually intelligible or accompanied by clarification. This practice underscores the asymmetry in mutual intelligibility between Russian and Ukrainian: Ukrainians typically understand Russian, while the reverse is not always true.

7. Loanwords vs code-switching

A common question in this context is: when does a code-switched word become a loanword? Typically, a loanword is defined as an item that has entered regular use within a community and is morphologically integrated into the recipient language (Poplack, 1989). The distinction between code-switching and borrowing has been extensively discussed (Romaine, 1989; Myers-Scotton, 1992). In fact, single-word switching is the most frequent form of code-switching, which complicates efforts to distinguish between the two.

For the purposes of this study, I will consider a word to be "borrowed" if it is regularly used, is morphologically integrated, and displaces a native equivalent in the speech of a community. It has also been noted (Gumperz, 1982; Romaine, 1995) that when political ideologies shift and a group becomes more conscious of its ethnic identity, attitudes toward code-mixing often change. The reality that Ukrainians are increasingly aware of threats to their cultural and linguistic identity forms the backdrop to the data discussed in this article.

An analysis of code choice and code-switching in bilingual people sometimes reveals a pattern of deliberate, premeditated switching that can be intentionally employed to evoke cultural identity, a sense of unity, and camaraderie. At the same time, as previously discussed, we know that code-switching is not always a conscious act.

Bell (1984) observes that the language of mass media typically reflects the norms of the audience it aims to engage. It is therefore unsurprising that bilinguals make use of all three codes—L1 (Ukrainian), L2 (English), and a mixed code—each strategically chosen to align with the identity of its readership. Conversely, Sebba (2002) notes that in written texts, monolingualism remains the norm. When two languages do appear in a text, they are usually kept distinct, each rendered in a separate monolingual code. Sebba attributes this phenomenon to "orthographic standardization," which varies in intensity depending on the domain. He introduces the concept of an "orthographic regime," suggesting that publishing as an institution adheres more strictly to these standards, whereas less institutional forms of writing (e.g., personal letters, diaries) are less regulated. The presence of mixed-language texts in institutional publications like magazines, therefore, can be seen as evidence of a shifting community norm toward greater linguistic integration.

With the exception of very few examples, linguistic necessity does not appear to be the driving force behind the code-switches observed in Ukraine since most people understand both languages. In these cases, Sometimes Russian terms are used despite the availability of Ukrainian equivalents and can be explained by the psycholinguistic concept of the "most accessible word," which applies in spontaneous conversation but not in carefully constructed written discourse. In writing, where there is time to select words, the psycholinguistic argument loses relevance. Oftentimes it is social motivations that explain the switches. Gumperz (1982) identifies several such motivations, emphasizing that code-switching can be a conscious tool used to construct a particular relationship between speaker and listener. Among these, switches that emphasize group identity (Blom & Gumperz, 1972) or foster solidarity are particularly relevant. To this list, we should also add the emotional and evocative power of language, as highlighted by many bilingual respondents.

8. Code-switching as language change

Historically, language change was viewed as an unobservable process (de Saussure, Bloomfield), only identifiable through comparisons of grammars across historical periods. Prescriptive

complaints about slang, borrowings, or deviations from “correct” forms were not considered valid evidence of change. However, Labov’s foundational work on language variation revolutionized this view by demonstrating that variability can be a window into change-in-progress. He argued that language change begins when a new linguistic form is adopted by a group, saying: “We can say that language has changed only when a group of speakers use a different pattern to communicate with each other” (Labov, 1972a, p. 277). While Labov’s studies focused on monolingual communities, similar arguments apply to bilingual settings where shifting norms of code use can mark ongoing change. In discussing bilingualism⁶ code-switching, and language choice it is essential to acknowledge the foundational contributions of key sociolinguists. Their work continues to illuminate the complex dynamics of language choice and bilingual identity, providing crucial frameworks for analyzing multilingual media discourse.

9. Surzhyk

A similar to code-switching yet distinct phenomenon common in Ukraine is the use of a dialect called Surzhyk. The term Surzhyk originates from the Ukrainian word meaning a mixture of grains—typically involving rye—or a product such as flour or bread made from such a mix (<http://sum.in.ua/s/surzhyk>). This metaphorical origin is appropriate, as the term now refers to a linguistic blend of Ukrainian and Russian. A useful comparison can be drawn with Swiss German in Switzerland, a widely spoken Umgangssprache (colloquial language), distinct from High German and showing significant regional variation (Giacalone Ramat, p. 48).

In Ukraine, Surzhyk refers to a broadly spoken mixed language combining lexical elements of Ukrainian and Russian, while generally following Ukrainian grammar—though the two languages are structurally quite similar. It is found not only across Ukraine but also in some adjacent regions of Russia and Moldova. Importantly, Surzhyk is neither a pidgin (a simplified language used for communication between groups without a common language) nor a creole (a stable, natural language developed from such a pidgin). Instead, it represents a hybrid that arose from sustained linguistic interference between Ukrainian and Russian. Although Surzhyk has existed for centuries, systematic research only began after the collapse of the USSR and Ukraine’s subsequent independence. As a result, there is still no universally accepted definition, though several have been proposed.

Lesya Stavitskaya and Vladimir Trub define Surzhyk as

“An uncodified colloquial style of speech arising from widespread Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism in a diglossic context. Surzhyk emerges through systemic interference at phonetic, morphological, lexical, and syntactic levels; it is represented by stable lexemes—‘Surzhykisms’—superimposed on either a Ukrainian or Russian base. It manifests through regional varieties of Ukrainian and functions as a language code among individuals with varying linguistic competence across different social, professional, and communicative contexts.”

(Ukrainian-Russian Bilingualism: Linguo-Sociocultural Aspects, Kyiv, Pulsary, 2007, p. 77)

Other scholars offer more succinct definitions. Linguist Larisa Masenko describes Surzhyk as

“The chaotic filling of broken links in the structure of Ukrainian with superficially acquired Russian elements.” (Surzhyk: Between Language and Tongue, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, 2011)

Similarly, Kuznetsova defines it as “Russian vocabulary with partial Ukrainian syntax, phonetics, and morphology.” (Archived copy, consulted Oct 11, 2007; original archived Nov 16, 2006)

Two important parameters for understanding Surzhyk use are the rural/urban divide and regional distribution. According to a 2003 survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, between 11% and 18% of Ukrainians reported speaking Surzhyk. In Western Ukraine—where Ukrainian predominates—only 2.5% of respondents spoke Surzhyk. In contrast, 12.4% in the South and 9.6% in the East reported speaking it. The higher proportion of Ukrainian speakers in the West helps explain the lower incidence of Surzhyk there. In the North-Central region, the number is even higher—up to 22%. However, these figures should be treated cautiously. Because Surzhyk is stigmatized, some respondents may underreport its use. Others may lack self-awareness regarding their speech patterns or speak Surzhyk only occasionally—perhaps switching depending on context (e.g., home vs. workplace). Moreover, code-switching occurs throughout Ukraine, even in regions where one language dominates. Whether these instances count as Surzhyk remains a subject of debate.

Surzhyk's specific lexical composition varies considerably, influenced by individual education levels, urban or rural residence, and regional speech norms. Russian vocabulary and phonetic influence are strongest in eastern and southern Ukraine, particularly near major Russian-speaking cities. In rural areas of eastern Ukraine—excluding cities like Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Luhansk—Surzhyk is common, whereas these cities predominantly use standard Russian, albeit with some regional phonetic traits (e.g., the soft “g”), which are also common in southern Russian dialects. In rural western Ukraine, speech shows less Russian influence but still bears its marks.

Despite being spoken widely, Surzhyk is often disparaged by educated Ukrainians, who promote normative literary Ukrainian. Ukrainian language teachers actively correct Surzhykisms—expressions or constructions borrowed from Russian—urging students to “speak the language of our ancestors correctly.” The problem is that, given the structural similarity between Ukrainian and Russian and their long coexistence, speakers have numerous opportunities for switching.

At the same time, language purists nowadays often favor distinctively Ukrainian words over those resembling Russian. For instance, both “поїзд” and “потяг” mean “train” in Ukrainian, but “поїзд” is identical in pronunciation, if not quite in spelling, to the Russian word “поезд,” so “потяг” is preferred in an effort to maintain linguistic purity.

These conscious efforts to distance Ukrainian from Russian influence are mostly the domain of educators and language specialists; however, they also often shape public discourse. Television programs frequently include segments correcting common Surzhykisms. For example, the popular morning show “1+1” features short language lessons with a well-known Ukrainian language educator Oleksandr Avramenko, who teaches viewers how to use Ukrainian equivalents instead of Russian borrowings.

Interestingly, some of the words targeted—such as “temple,” “cheekbones,” or “entryway”—are not inherently complex. Rather, they are simply words that many Ukrainians habitually use in Russian. This reflects the unique linguistic situation in Ukraine: in contrast to most countries, where language programs focus on enriching vocabulary or clarifying idioms, Ukraine's language media often aim to replace familiar Russian terms with proper Ukrainian ones—sometimes for the most basic concepts.

In conclusion, the current resurgence of the Ukrainian language, accelerated by recent geopolitical events, underscores its evolving social and political significance in Ukrainian society.

10. Understanding language situation in Ukraine

To better understand the current linguistic situation in Ukraine, I analyze natural speech from mass media—radio and television—featuring various types of bilingual speakers. This analysis includes interviews with the prominent Ukrainian politician Mykhailo Podolyak, with another well-known political figure Yuliya Tymoshenko, and with the Russian-speaking military expert Roman Svitan, who was interviewed by a Ukrainian-speaking journalist. I also examine a street poll conducted in an eastern Ukrainian city asking residents whether they use Surzhyk, as well as a playful pre-presidency interview with Volodymyr Zelensky in which he primarily speaks Russian but intersperses Ukrainian words.

My goal is to examine the structure and frequency of code-switching, loan words, language choice and any other linguistic phenomena in these authentic contexts and determine whether particular instances of switching reflect conscious linguistic choices or unconscious habits. This analysis aims to identify the social meaning embedded in each type of switch and contribute to a better understanding of language use in contemporary Ukrainian society.

11. Analysis of contemporary code-switching in Ukrainian media.

The first sample I analyze is an 8-minute YouTube commentary by Mykhailo Podolyak, advisor to the Head of President Zelensky's Office, discussing the current political negotiations between Ukraine and Russia in Istanbul. Podolyak is a Ukrainian-Russian bilingual, with a high degree of fluency in both. His command of Ukrainian is explained by his studies in Lviv, a city in Western Ukraine where Russian is rarely spoken. At the same time, his extensive work experience in Belarus—a country where Russian has effectively displaced Belarusian in most public domains—has ensured his mastery of Russian as well.

Several notable linguistic features can be observed in the commentary:

- "У тому числі": This is a direct calque from the Russian "в том числе" ("including"). Ukrainian language authorities recommend alternatives such as "зокрема," "серед іншого," or "між іншим." However, there are also Ukrainians who would disagree and insist that the expression is totally acceptable.

- "Туда входили": This phrase reflects a simple substitution of the Russian word "туда" ("there") instead of the correct Ukrainian "туди." The similarity of words likely facilitates this substitution which is no doubt a simple slip of the tongue by a person who frequently uses both words.

- "Офіс президенту": This is a genitive case error ("президенту" instead of the correct "президента"). Interestingly, the correct Ukrainian form aligns with Russian grammar in this case, making Podolyak's usage unusual—a mistake not typical for native Russian speakers but an understandable one for a Ukrainian native speaker (there are very complex rules for when to use the ending "а" vs "у" in the genitive case in Ukrainian).

- "Виглядає": While "виглядати" exists in Ukrainian, its original meaning is "to look out" (e.g., from a window). Using it in the sense of "to look like" (a Russism) is considered incorrect; "має вигляд" is the normative expression, but the mistake occurs frequently in Ukrainian.

- "Приміняти зброю": A calque from Russian "применять оружие" ("to use weapons"), instead of the correct Ukrainian "застосувати зброю."

In summary, within eight minutes of rapid speech, Podolyak, an educated bilingual speaker, used one Russian word where the Ukrainian equivalent is almost identical and produced three Russian loan translations—each of which is common in colloquial Ukrainian and does not sound alien to native ears. One of his mistakes, however, was uniquely Ukrainian and would not be expected from a native Russian speaker. This highlights the nuanced nature of bilingual interference, particularly when code-switching becomes unconscious and integrated into fluent speech.

The second sample comes from Yulia Tymoshenko, a prominent Ukrainian politician and the first woman to serve as the Prime Minister of Ukraine. Born in 1960 in Dnipropetrovsk (now Dnipro) in Eastern Ukraine, she did not learn Ukrainian until she entered politics at the age of thirty-six. Now, more than thirty years later, she consistently uses Ukrainian in public settings, providing a valuable example of long-term second-language acquisition in a political context.

For consistency, I analyzed an 8-minute portion of her video presentation, which, while evidently rehearsed, was not read verbatim.

Key observations include:

- Pronunciation: Tymoshenko maintains a noticeable Russian accent. She frequently uses the hard Russian Г ("G") instead of the soft Ukrainian Г ("H"), as heard in words like "Енергоатом" and "Електроенергія." She also pronounces the hard Russian "Ш" instead of the softer Ukrainian equivalent in words like "наши." Her Russian vowel reduction is also evident: "просто" becomes "проста," and "компанія" becomes "кампанія."

- Lexical Interference:

О "В тому числі" – again, a calque from Russian that is common in Ukrainian speech as discussed with the previous speaker.

О "Управляти атомом" – uses the Russian-derived "управляти" instead of the native Ukrainian "керувати."

- Code-mixing: Tymoshenko occasionally switches fully into Russian mid-sentence: "во Франции," "новый премьер-министр," "находится на фронте," и "вот вам." None of these instances could have an explanation other than Russian is her dominant language and she sometimes substitutes Ukrainian with Russian.

- Grammatical influence: She declines incorrectly the Ukrainian word "відсотки" (percent) as "відсотка," using the Russian case ending in genitive case, whereas in Ukrainian genitive is not used in this situation.

- Mixed prepositional phrase: In "при підтримці" she correctly uses the Ukrainian word "підтримка" (in Russian "поддержка") but with the Russian preposition "при." Thus, Tymoshenko demonstrates a full structural blend: the Russian preposition demands consonant mutation per Ukrainian grammar, resulting in a hybrid structure that is neither fully Russian nor correct Ukrainian—a perfect example of morphosyntactic fusion in code-switching.

The third sample is an interview on Ukrainian television between journalist Ihor Havryshchak and military expert Roman Svitan. The journalist asks questions entirely in Ukrainian—fluent, literary, and consistent. Svitan replies entirely in Russian, though with a Ukrainian accent (soft “G” and “V” sounding closer to English “W”). This accent, however, can also be found in Southern Russian dialects and is typical of both South Russia and Eastern and South Ukraine.

The journalist’s language dominance is clearly Ukrainian, and in other interviews, he occasionally uses Ukrainianisms, even when speaking Russian. Svitan, meanwhile, prefers Russian, likely due to his East Ukrainian background. The dual-language format reflects broader media norms in Ukraine, where journalists often maintain Ukrainian for questions while guests reply in Russian. This practice ensures Ukrainian national identity is represented while maintaining accessibility for Russian-speaking Ukrainians and potential audiences in Russia. Even when Russian speakers do not understand the questions fully, the crucial content—the answers—remains clear.

These three examples represent the range of code-switching and bilingualism encountered in present-day Ukraine. Two other scenarios—monolingual Ukrainian and monolingual Russian speakers—are common but linguistically unremarkable and thus omitted from this analysis.

A final case worth noting is a brief street interview in Pryluky, an Eastern Ukrainian city, where passersby were asked whether they speak Surzhyk and how they perceive others who speak different varieties.

The journalist speaks standard Ukrainian. Ten individuals respond:

- One couple replies in Russian, with heavy Russian accents, identifying themselves as non-locals.
- A man, speaking Russian with a Ukrainian accent, explains that he speaks Russian because his family lived in Russia during the Soviet times, but he proudly notes that his daughter speaks perfect Ukrainian.
- Three respondents openly say they speak Surzhyk, describing it as their “native dialect.”
- Five others claim to speak Ukrainian but, with the exception of one, actually speak in Surzhyk without realizing it.

This demonstrates that in Central Ukraine, Surzhyk is not only widespread but often unacknowledged as distinct. The journalist notes, citing the Kyiv Institute of Sociology, that 12% of Ukrainians speak Surzhyk, while some online commenters claim it is closer to 60%. While the latter is anecdotal, it does reflect the widespread perception—and possible underestimation—of Surzhyk use.

A final, now-historic example is a 2-minute pre-presidency video of Volodymyr Zelensky being interviewed in Ukrainian and responding mostly in Russian with occasional Ukrainian words. This instance exemplifies lexical-level code-switching rather than Surzhyk.

Zelensky, a native Russian speaker, had to learn Ukrainian upon assuming office. His efforts included hiring a private tutor, Oleksandr Avramenko. Initially criticized for occasional use of Russian, Zelensky now speaks exclusively in Ukrainian in public, a shift accelerated by the full-scale Russian invasion and the resulting political necessity to demonstrate linguistic allegiance to the Ukrainian state.

12. Conclusion

The linguistic landscape in Ukraine today is characterized by a dynamic, fluid interplay between Ukrainian and Russian, shaped by geography, historical policy, social identity, and current political realities. The three analyzed cases—Mykhailo Podolyak, Yulia Tymoshenko, and Roman Svitan—highlight different dimensions of bilingualism, code-switching, and language interference. While each speaker navigates this bilingual space differently, certain patterns emerge.

Podolyak, a native bilingual speaker, demonstrates subconscious lexical borrowing and occasional syntactic influence from Russian, even in formal settings. His usage reflects what might be termed “elite bilingualism,” where high fluency in both languages leads to subtle and socially acceptable interferences. Tymoshenko, by contrast, is a second-language learner of Ukrainian whose speech retains clear phonetic and grammatical traces of her Russian-dominant background. Her speech shows deeper structural borrowings, including full lexical and syntactic blends, which are symptomatic of acquired bilingualism that is politically motivated rather than socially embedded.

The Podolyak-Tymoshenko contrast reveals the extent to which Russian continues to permeate the speech of even those Ukrainian politicians who consciously adopt Ukrainian as their public language. Meanwhile, the Svitan interview offers a snapshot of functional bilingualism in media: the Ukrainian-speaking journalist and Russian-speaking expert co-construct a conversation in two languages, with full mutual intelligibility and communicative efficiency. This type of bilingual media discourse—where both speakers remain in their dominant language—is increasingly common and reflects a uniquely Ukrainian linguistic pragmatism shaped by decades of coexistence.

Beyond the formal and political elite, the example from Pryluky underscores a broader sociolinguistic reality: Surzhyk remains widespread and deeply normalized in much of the country. Its speakers often perceive it as Ukrainian, blurring distinctions between standard Ukrainian, colloquial usage, and hybrid forms. The case of Zelensky—once a symbol of Russian-speaking Ukrainian identity, now a fluent and consistent Ukrainian speaker—mirrors a wider sociopolitical transformation in which language use has become a powerful marker of national loyalty.

Altogether, these linguistic performances suggest that Ukrainian society is not merely bilingual, but bidialectal and fluidly diglossic. Language choice is often not a matter of ability but of identity, context, and political meaning. In the post-2014 and especially post-2022 landscape, Ukrainian has emerged as the dominant symbolic language of statehood, while Russian remains deeply embedded in private life, media, and regional usage. The result is not necessarily a shift to monolingualism but rather a reconfiguration of bilingual norms—where who speaks what, when, and how, has become both a personal and national statement.

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