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Tetiana Kuznietsova

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, Kyiv, Ukraine
arnautova.tv@gmail.com

Key Trends in Shifting Attitudes Towards Ukrainian–Russian Mixed Speech in Wartime

Abstract

Surzhyk, as a Ukrainian–Russian mixed subcode, has long been a subject of extensive research. Despite this, it remains an ambiguous phenomenon that elicits diverse assessments and attitudes. Within Ukrainian academic circles, a tradition has emerged of evaluating this communicative subcode through the prism of linguistic norms, predominantly characterising it as a negative phenomenon. However, in everyday communication, Surzhyk functions dynamically, reflecting the varied attitudes of its speakers. Significant shifts in its perception became particularly evident following the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, Russian-speaking individuals have increasingly adopted Surzhyk as a means of distancing themselves from the Russian language, which is widely perceived as the language of the aggressor. This article presents the results of a sociolinguistic study conducted in 2020–2021 and 2023–2024 among residents of the Odesa and Mykolaiv regions. The study examines the evolution of attitudes towards Surzhyk in the wake of the invasion, with particular attention given to the role of mass media discourse in shaping these perceptions. The analysis reveals a growing tendency towards a more favourable view of mixed speech; in the context of war, Surzhyk has come to symbolise solidarity and serves as an informal linguistic bridge for transitioning from Russian-dominant to Ukrainian-speaking communication.
Keywords: Surzhyk; Ukrainian-Russian mixed speech; language attitudes; language behaviour; media discourse

1 Introduction

Surzhyk, the Ukrainian–Russian mixed speech, has recently attracted considerable scholarly interest. Over the past two or three decades, a distinct tradition of academic research has developed, focusing both on linguistic attitudes and on the functional and structural characteristics of this phenomenon (see, for example, the monographs by Bilaniuk, 2005; Bracki, 2009; Del Gaudio, 2010; Masenko, 1999, 2004, as well as articles by these and other authors, and the results of international projects[1] on this topic).

Despite the growing body of research on Surzhyk, several important issues concerning its definition and sociolinguistic status remain unresolved. Notably, in Ukraine, Surzhyk is perhaps the only linguistic

[1] See, for example: Language Policy in Ukraine: Anthropological, Linguistic and Further Perspectives (INTAS, 2006–2009); Region, Nation and Beyond. An Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Reconceptualisation of Ukraine (University of St. Gallen, 2012–2015); Bi- and multilingualism between conflict intensification and conflict resolution. Ethno-linguistic conflicts, language politics and contact situations in post-Soviet Ukraine and Russia (Justus Liebig University Giessen, 2016–2019); Variability and stability in a mixed substandard in extensive and time-stable language contact: The Ukrainian–Russian Surzhyk in Ukraine (Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, 2014–2019); Hybridisation from two sides: Ukrainian–Russian and Russian–Ukrainian code mixing in the context of the sociolinguistic situation in the South of Ukraine along the Black Sea coast (Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg and University of Klagenfurt, 2019–2024).

term that provokes such a wide range of emotional and evaluative responses – not only among scholars but also among politicians, writers, journalists, and the very speakers who use this mixed code.

The foundations of scholarly inquiry into this phenomenon were laid in the 1920s and 1930s by researchers such as Oleksa Horbatsch, Olena Kurylo, Ivan Ohienko, Roman Smal-Stockyj, Mykola Sulyma, and Vasyl Chaplenko, who examined issues of language culture and identified various non-standard features in the speech of Ukrainian speakers.

However, the political constraints of the Soviet era significantly hindered the development of such research. For decades, Surzhyk lacked scholarly legitimacy, largely due to the ideological imperatives of the USSR that restricted inquiry into the realities of linguistic life. Empirical investigations of language use were often discouraged, as they risked challenging the officially sanctioned narrative of "harmonious bilingualism" and the purported "beneficial influence" of the Russian language on Ukrainian (Masenko, 2004). This pattern is consistent with broader tendencies observed in authoritarian regimes, where language policy functions as a tool for shaping national identity and suppressing linguistic diversity (Blommaert, 1999; Shevchuk-Kliuzheva, 2020; Shohamy, 2006).

During the Soviet period, academic institutions were required to adhere strictly to the ideological line of the Communist Party. As a result, the phenomenon of Ukrainian–Russian language mixing was excluded from open scholarly discussion. Linguistic research was therefore limited to occasional mentions of isolated non-standard forms, which were typically dismissed as insignificant anomalies. Contradicting observable linguistic realities, the official position maintained that such forms did not exist among the "broad masses" of the population (see *Usne pobutove literaturne movlennia*, 1970, p. 10).

With Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991, the lifting of ideological constraints enabled scholars to address a broader range of sociocultural and linguistic issues openly. As a result, Ukrainian–Russian mixed speech once again became a subject of scholarly interest. As Michael Moser observes, Surzhyk has even become a somewhat "fashionable" topic in Ukrainian linguistics (Mozer, 2016, p. 27). However, despite this renewed interest and the growing body of research, a prevailing tendency in Ukrainian academic discourse has been to evaluate Surzhyk through the lens of linguistic normativity – frequently framing it as a negative or undesirable phenomenon. In particular, Surzhyk is often perceived as a vestige of "inferiority" that should either be forgotten or "eradicated", with little consideration for its actual nature (Britsyn et al., 2011, pp. 91–92). Moreover, scholars have emphasised its allegedly destructive influence on the literary form of the Ukrainian language and its pathogenic potential (see, for example: IAvir, 2002; Matiiash, 2002; Trub, 2000).

In connection with this approach to evaluating mixed speech within Ukrainian academic discourse, stereotypical labels of for Surzhyk gradually took hold. These labels became increasingly apparent, reflecting a predominantly negative attitude towards it: "*linguistic mutilation*" (Ukr. – *мовна каліч*[2]) (Ruda, 2000, p. 8), "*mongrel, grotesque hybrid*" (Ukr. – *покруч, химерний мішанець*) (Stavyts′ka, 2001, p. 21), "*language disorder, language pathology*" (Ukr. – *мовний безлад, мовна паталогія*) (Serbens′ka, 2002), "*linguistic and communicative manifestation of national schizophrenia*" (Ukr. – *мовно-комунікативний прояв національної шизофренії*) (Shumylov, 2000, p. 116), "*unfortunate cripple*" (Ukr. – *каліка нещасна*) (Okara, 2001), "*language helplessness*" (Ukr. – *мовна безпорадність*) (Dziuba, 2005, p. 14).

The emergence of such negative labels is largely attributable to the traditional perception of Surzhyk in Ukrainian linguistics as a consequence of Russian colonial influence and the long-standing pro-Russian language policy in Ukraine (for details, see Taranenko, 2007). Understandably, the historically accumulated protest against the suppression of the Ukrainian language – systematically enforced through the enduring policy of Russification – has, over time, redirected a certain symbolic aggression towards the hybrid variety itself.

However, attitudes towards Surzhyk have begun to shift, reflecting broader changes in language ideologies. Such ideological transformations often intensify during periods of political upheaval and sociocultural

[2] Throughout this article, only examples with metaphorical or contextually nuanced meanings are provided in the original language to preserve their full semantic and cultural significance. All other examples are presented in English translation.

change, when linguistic hierarchies, identity categories, and norms of legitimacy are renegotiated and redefined.

This process has become particularly pronounced in the context of the Russian–Ukrainian war. Within this environment, perceptions of Surzhyk have acquired new meanings and dimensions, shaped by evolving social, political, and communicative realities.

Nevertheless, despite these developments, the impact of recent geopolitical shifts – especially Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – on public and media perceptions of Surzhyk remains insufficiently explored. This study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the current trends in public attitudes towards Surzhyk?
- How has Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine influenced perceptions of this mixed speech?
- Has the representation of Surzhyk in the media evolved in response to wartime transformations?

2 Methodology

Today, various approaches and research perspectives are employed to characterise language attitudes (see, for example, Dragojevic et al., 2021, for an overview of approaches to studying this issue). Typically, language attitudes are investigated through sociolinguistic analyses of language behaviour, the linguistic situation within a region or country, and language policy. Such analyses enable the identification of direct evaluative characteristics of language varieties, as well as the determination of their status and prestige, or lack thereof (see, for example, Garrett, 2010; Hentschel & Zeller, 2016; Preston, 1999; Vessey, 2016; Zeller, 2022; Zeller & Hentschel, 2024).

It is well established, however, that the media play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards different languages within an information society. As the primary source of knowledge for the majority of the population, the media acquire social value and influence. By accumulating a system of moral and ethical dominants that may become deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the mass audience, the media not only define but also transform society's value priorities. From this perspective, they can be regarded as a unique axiological-informational mechanism that transmits, directs, and, under certain conditions, modifies societal values and attitudes towards them (Kuznietsova, 2009, pp. 6–7). Given this, it is essential to analyse the mass media space as an environment that reflects, disseminates, and, under certain conditions, shapes and transforms language attitudes.

Our study employs a comprehensive methodology to analyse language attitudes from both sociolinguistic and communication perspectives. We focus on trends in changing attitudes towards the mixed Ukrainian–Russian speech used in everyday communication by residents of the Odesa and Mykolaiv regions, which have emerged following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Odesa and Mykolaiv regions are particularly significant in this context, as one of the stated objectives of Russia's so-called "special military operation" in Ukraine was the protection of the Russian-speaking population allegedly persecuted by "Ukrainian nationalists". These southern Black Sea coastal regions have traditionally been characterised by widespread Russian-speaking behaviour among many inhabitants. However, they should be recognised as multilingual areas where various language codes are actively used. According to the study *Hybridisation from Two Sides: Ukrainian–Russian and Russian–Ukrainian Code Mixing in the Sociolinguistic Context of Southern Ukraine along the Black Sea Coast*, conducted between 2019 and 2021, the everyday speech of residents in the Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Kherson regions actively includes Ukrainian, Russian, and Surzhyk. It is important to note that most respondents identified as multilingual and reported using several codes in their language practices (for details, see Hentschel & Palinska, 2022a, 2022b). Naturally, there are evident individual differences – for example, some respondents primarily use one code, others two, and some actively employ all three codes due to various influencing factors. Nevertheless, a distinct multilingual situation generally prevails, in which Russian, Ukrainian, and Surzhyk coexist.

This research reveals the peculiarities of the language situation in the southern regions of Ukraine prior to the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation. However, it is evident that following 24 February 2022, various trends of change may emerge within this sociolinguistic landscape.

To identify these changes, we conducted a comparative analysis of sociological survey data collected from 40 residents of the Odesa and Mykolaiv regions during two periods: 2020–2021 and 2023–2024. Longitudinal studies of this nature are considered capable of revealing significant trends in change, as well as elucidating their underlying causes and the attitudes of specific individuals towards particular phenomena, behaviours, or situations at different points in time (for further details, see Kuznietsova, 2024).

Our research utilises data from sociological surveys conducted between 2020 and 2021 within the framework of the project *Hybridisation from Two Sides: Ukrainian–Russian and Russian–Ukrainian Code Mixing in the Sociolinguistic Context of Southern Ukraine along the Black Sea Coast*. This project primarily investigated Surzhyk, a mixed Ukrainian–Russian speech variety. As part of this study, 1,200 respondents from the Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Kherson regions were surveyed concerning their attitudes towards language policy, general geopolitical orientations, identity, and linguistic practices across diverse communicative situations.[3]

Between 2023 and 2024, we conducted a follow-up survey involving the same 40 respondents from the Mykolaiv and Odesa regions who had participated in the earlier comprehensive study. This longitudinal panel design enabled us to track temporal shifts in perceptions of language policy, self-identification, attitudes towards everyday language codes (Ukrainian, Russian, and Surzhyk), and actual language behaviour. While we acknowledge that the sample size is limited and the survey was conducted only in two regions of Ukraine, the analysis nevertheless allows us to identify emerging trends and patterns that may be indicative of broader sociolinguistic shifts.

In this article, we focus on trends in changes concerning direct attitudes towards Surzhyk. In addition to the sociolinguistic survey data collected from the 2020–2021 and 2023–2024 samples, our analysis incorporates respondents' comments provided during the surveys, as well as journalistic interviews published in Ukrainian media between 2022 and 2024.

To examine prevailing attitudes towards Surzhyk in Ukrainian mass media before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of national media publications spanning 2013 to 2024. The media sample included leading Ukrainian outlets such as *Radio Svoboda*, *Espreso*, *Suspil'ne: Kul'tura*, *TSN*, *ICTV*, *Channel 24*, *Krym Realii*, *Ukrainian News*, *Ukrainian Week*, *Ukrainska Pravda*, *Ukrinform*, *Gazeta.ua*, and *New Voice*. Materials were collected through a comprehensive keyword search using the term "Surzhyk" applied to the official online archives and databases of these platforms. A continuous sampling strategy was utilised to capture all relevant publications within the specified timeframe. In total, over 200 media texts were identified.

The qualitative content analysis was carried out through several systematic stages to ensure methodological rigour. All retrieved media texts (N = 213) were thoroughly reviewed for relevance according to explicit inclusion criteria: (1) the mention of the term "Surzhyk"; and (2) the presence of explicit or implicit evaluative attitudes towards Surzhyk, whether positive, negative, or neutral. Texts that only briefly mentioned Surzhyk without substantive commentary were excluded.

The unit of analysis was defined as the immediate discursive context in which evaluative attitudes towards Surzhyk were explicitly or implicitly conveyed. This included any segment of text – from a single sentence to several adjacent sentences – where Surzhyk was described, assessed, or positioned with regard to linguistic norms, social value, or identity. This flexible definition allowed for capturing both direct statements and more nuanced, context-dependent representations.

Following this procedure, a thematic analysis was conducted to examine changes in the dominant evaluative patterns of Surzhyk over time, with particular focus on shifts between the pre-invasion (2014–2021) and post-invasion (2022–2024) periods. This qualitative approach enabled the identification and tracing of the principal attitudinal models and representations of Surzhyk as reflected in media discourse throughout the analysed timeframe.

[3] For a detailed analysis of the research methodology, see: https://uol.de/slavistik/forschung/sprachwissenschaft/hybridisierung-von-zwei-seiten (*Hybridisierung von zwei Seiten*, n.d.).

3 Research Findings

3.1 Attitude to Surzhyk of Surzhyk Speakers

Until 2022, the majority of studies by Ukrainian linguists highlighted predominantly negative perceptions of Surzhyk, linking it to linguistic degradation, postcolonial remnants, or sociocultural marginalisation (see Levchuk, 2020; Masenko, 2019, 2020; Rysich-Shafraniets, 2021; Sokolova, 2021).

However, it is well established that language attitudes are not static; rather, they are highly sensitive to sociopolitical upheavals, ideological shifts, and transformations in collective identity (Blommaert, 1999; Silverstein, 1998).

Moreover, speakers of Surzhyk themselves tend to evaluate this mixed code in diverse and often contradictory ways. In particular, Gerd Hentschel and Jan Patrick Zeller, analysing data from a large-scale sociolinguistic study of Ukrainian–Russian mixed speech conducted within the framework of a project at the Institute of Slavic Studies, University of Oldenburg, identified four distinct groups of respondents based on their attitudes towards Surzhyk: "convinced opponents" (who consider Surzhyk culturally harmful and believe it should be avoided even in private contexts), "moderate skeptics" (who do not see Surzhyk as a threat to culture but think it should still be avoided privately), "cautious supporters" (who view Surzhyk as culturally harmful but convenient for use in private settings), and "persuasive friends" (who consider Surzhyk culturally harmless and convenient for private use) (Hentschel & Zeller, 2016, pp. 652–657).

This typology demonstrates that attitudes towards Surzhyk in Ukrainian society have never been unequivocally negative but have varied depending on context, educational level, region, and respondents' self-identification. This perspective aligns with contemporary sociolinguistic approaches, particularly theories of language attitudes and ideologies (Garrett, 2010; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994), which emphasise that language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic resource integral to processes of social stratification, self-identification, and political allegiance.

Significant shifts in evaluative attitudes towards Surzhyk became noticeable following Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Our research conducted in 2023–2024 reveals a clear trend towards a more positive and loyal perception of this mixed speech variety. While in 2020–2021 approximately one-third of respondents held negative views of Surzhyk and only 23% expressed positive attitudes, by 2023–2024 the proportion of negative evaluations had dropped dramatically to just 6%, with over half of the respondents now expressing favourable opinions (see Figure 1). This change highlights a marked transformation in public sentiment within a relatively short period, reflecting broader sociopolitical and cultural shifts in the Ukrainian context.

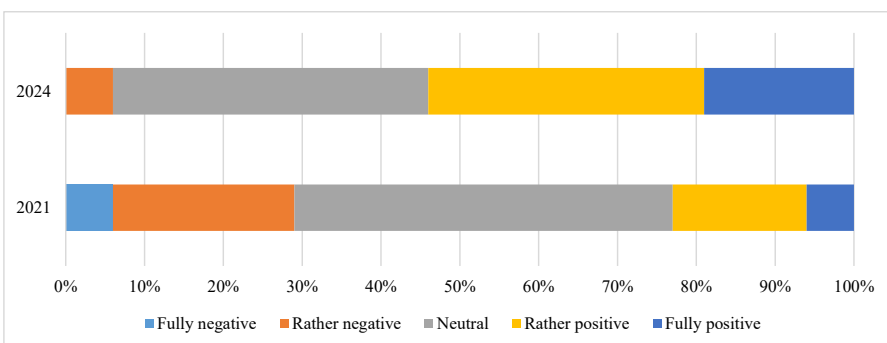


Figure 1. How do you feel about the fact that some people use a mixed language?

Many respondents increasingly identify Surzhyk as an integral part of their native language repertoire. In the 2024 survey, 100% of participants identified Ukrainian as their native language, up from 83% in 2020. More importantly, the proportion of respondents who consider both Ukrainian and Surzhyk as native

linguistic codes rose sharply – from 40% in 2020 to 61% in 2024. This notable increase indicates a growing acceptance and legitimisation of Surzhyk, signalling a shift from its previous marginalisation towards recognition as a valid and meaningful element of individual linguistic identity. The data suggest that Surzhyk is no longer viewed merely as a "mixed" or "inferior" code but embraced as a natural and valued part of everyday communication and self-identification.

Particularly noteworthy is the increasing tendency among respondents to ascribe symbolic meaning to the concept of "native language". When asked, "What does your native language mean to you?", a growing number of participants associate their native language with notions of community, ethnicity, and national identity. This trend highlights the metaphorical role of language as "the code of the nation", emphasising its significance beyond mere communication to encompass collective belonging and cultural heritage (see Table 1).

Table 1. What does "native language" mean to you?

	2021	**2024**
The language I learned to speak as a child	54	63
The language I speak best	27	27
The language I use in my everyday life	17	28
The language I think in	44	37
The language of my parents	**68**	**74**
The language of my country	**74**	**79**
The language of the nationality to which I belong	44	55
A language that I love and appreciate	61	27
The language of my homeland and my ancestors	**63**	**69**

Thus, Surzhyk, increasingly recognised by speakers as a native language, has not only received more favourable evaluations but has also come to function as a significant marker of Ukrainianness. It now symbolises national affiliation, operates as a means of personal and collective self-identification, and acts as an instrument fostering social solidarity among its speakers. This transformation illustrates broader shifts in the sociolinguistic landscape, reflecting changes in the "configuration of connections between language practice and language loyalty" (Azhniuk, 2022, p. 22), whereby linguistic choices become intertwined with expressions of identity and political affiliation.

This phenomenon reflects a broader sociolinguistic trend whereby, in times of political upheaval and social challenges, speech varieties that were previously stigmatised often undergo symbolic revalorisation. Surzhyk, long regarded as a sign of linguistic degradation or "incorrectness", is increasingly being reinterpreted as a marker of national self-identification. In this context, Surzhyk transcends its status as a mere mixed speech variety, emerging instead as a vital resource for social positioning and identity construction, thereby highlighting the resilience and adaptability of the Ukrainian linguistic landscape.

A more tolerant attitude towards Surzhyk has also become apparent in the public domain, particularly when it is used by public figures. In response to the question, "*Do you agree that politicians, officials, or other representatives of authority may use a mixed language?*", only 6% of respondents in 2020–2021 supported its use in formal communication, and 44% considered its use acceptable in informal interactions with the public. By 2023–2024, these numbers had increased to 11% and 65%, respectively (see Figure 2). This shift reflects a broader acceptance of Surzhyk not only in private and everyday communication but also in interactions involving individuals in positions of authority.

Such shifts in attitudes are largely driven by the emergence of a pronounced negative perception of the Russian language, which, in the context of the ongoing war, has come to symbolise "the language of the enemy."[4] For many respondents, the rejection of Russian has become a matter of principle during this period of aggression, as reflected in the following statements:

[4] Cf., for example: Kulyk (2022, 2024a, 2024b); Shumyts′ka (2022); Matveieva (2022, 2023); Zalizniak (2023); Sokolova (2023).

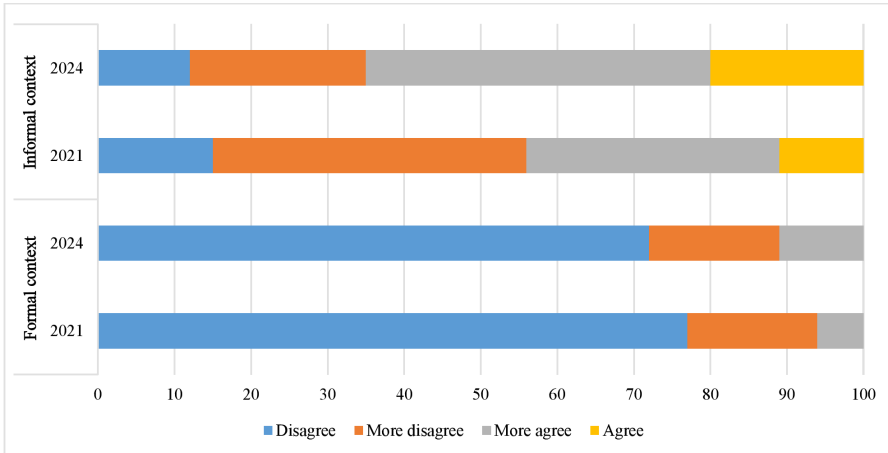


Figure 2. Do you agree that politicians, officials, or other representatives of authority may use a mixed language?

> "*Now, anything Russian is a danger. This language is like a red rag, and people are trying to get rid of it, switching to Ukrainian to weed out those who are not their own and identify the enemy*" (NV, 5 January 2023);
> "*The motivation to speak Ukrainian is a great desire not to have anything to do with the invaders*" (Ukrainska Pravda, 28 May 2022);
> "*I can't; I don't want to speak Russian. Now, Russian is the language of my enemy*" (ICTV, 20 May 2022).

In this context, growing "loyalty" towards mixed speech can also be observed among Russian-speaking individuals – particularly those who, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have gradually begun to adopt Surzhyk in specific communicative situations as a way of signalling their pro-Ukrainian stance. As some respondents noted: "*It's better to speak this Surzhyk than Russian*"; "*I try to speak Ukrainian; it's still difficult, but Surzhyk helps.*"

This transitional use of Surzhyk by former Russian speakers carries important symbolic meaning. It reflects not only a pragmatic adaptation to changing linguistic norms but also a conscious effort to distance oneself from the language ideologically associated with the aggressor state. In this regard, Surzhyk becomes a temporary but meaningful linguistic resource – a bridge towards fuller integration into Ukrainian-language practices and a marker of shifting identity alignment. Such practices resonate with the concepts of "language crossing" (Rampton, 1995) and "linguistic accommodation" (Giles & Powesland, 1975), highlighting the role of code choice as an instrument of social positioning and ideological reorientation. This reconfiguration of linguistic behaviour underlines how language, even in its hybrid forms, functions as a powerful tool for expressing solidarity, resistance, and emerging collective identities in times of sociopolitical crisis (Blommaert, 1999; Woolard, 1998).

These examples illustrate how the war has transformed public attitudes towards Surzhyk. The symbolic rejection of the Russian language during wartime, even among previously Russian-speaking populations, has opened ideological space for Surzhyk to be re-evaluated as a legitimate – and in some cases, even an "authentic" – Ukrainian communicative code.

Drawing on the ethnolinguistic vitality framework (Giles et al., 1977), the increased use of Surzhyk reflects a broader shift in perceptions of group identity and language status. Once stigmatised as a marker of linguistic deficiency, Surzhyk has gained symbolic capital amid the current sociopolitical context. This change aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic "market value", where prestige and legitimacy are socially constructed and dependent on historical and political conditions.

Today, Surzhyk is increasingly perceived and used as "our" code – a form of linguistic resistance and symbolic opposition to "the language of the invaders." Acting as the code of "one's own", Surzhyk often

acquires connotations such as "ours", "understandable", "familiar", and "native language." This is evident both in communication with family members and in interactions with strangers (for more details, see Kuznietsova, 2023). For example, some respondents express this as follows:

"*Well, if a man, for example, comes up and speaks in our language, then we also respond in our language.*"
"*You have to speak to your people in Surzhyk. It feels like home.*"
"*When my mom or another relative calls, I just pick up and slip into my beloved Surzhyk.*"

This intimate and familiar use of Surzhyk within close social circles is complemented by its expanding presence in broader public interactions. Analysing respondents' answers about language use when communicating with strangers reveals notable growth in Surzhyk's communicative functions. In response to the question, "*Which of the following languages do you use most often when communicating with strangers?*", data from 2024 indicate an increased use of Surzhyk across both rural and urban settings, including public transport and shops (see Figure 3).

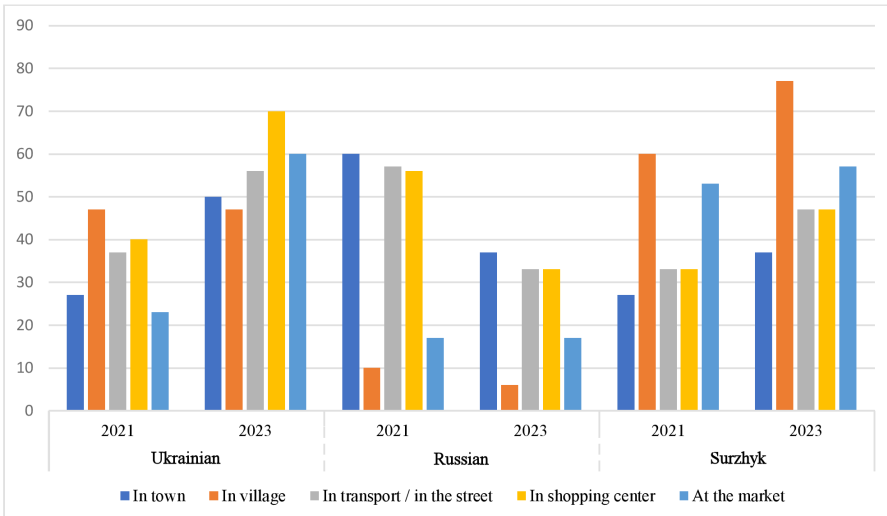


Figure 3. Which of the following languages do you use most often when communicating with strangers?

This shift does not merely signify a quantitative increase in the use of Surzhyk but also points to a possible qualitative transformation in its sociolinguistic status among certain speakers. Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion, Surzhyk was widely regarded as a low-prestige, non-standard variety – an "incorrect" form of speech associated with linguistic deficiency. However, the war has disrupted established language ideologies, repositioning Surzhyk within new communicative and symbolic hierarchies for some speaker groups.

Drawing on Blommaert's (2010) framework of sociolinguistic scales, this emerging transformation can be understood as a reconfiguration of what constitutes linguistic legitimacy in particular communicative contexts. According to this model, language varieties gain or lose social value depending on their indexical potential – the social meanings they evoke in specific situations. Data from 2023–2024 show that Surzhyk has begun to ascend these sociolinguistic scales by expanding into broader communicative domains. This suggests that, for some speakers, Surzhyk is increasingly perceived not merely as a home or in-group code but as a legitimate and recognised form of speech in wider social encounters, where its indexical meaning shifts from marking marginality to signalling shared identity, authenticity, and solidarity.

More broadly, Surzhyk appears to be gaining acceptance among segments of the Ukrainian-speaking community as an integral part of the national linguistic landscape – a "native" code organically linked to national identity and, importantly, to resistance against political aggression and linguistic imperialism from

Russia. This reflects a movement away from rigid binaries such as "correct" versus "incorrect" language towards a more nuanced understanding of linguistic hybridity and legitimacy. Surzhyk's trajectory – from a previously marginalised variety to a potential form of symbolic capital for some speakers – illustrates the dynamic interplay between language, ideology, and sociopolitical upheaval. Far from being merely a symptom of linguistic degradation, Surzhyk is increasingly emerging, at least in part, as a linguistic emblem of "Ukrainianness", embodying the resilience of contemporary Ukrainian identity, particularly in the context of the ongoing war, where linguistic practices have become closely intertwined with expressions of national solidarity and resistance.

3.2 Attitude to Surzhyk in the Media

The transformation of Surzhyk is also clearly reflected in mass media discourse. For a long time, Surzhyk was predominantly subjected to severe criticism in Ukrainian media. Media representations typically framed Surzhyk through emotionally charged messages emphasising its negative potential and its destructive influence on linguistic behaviour and language consciousness. A prevalent stereotype was constructed in Ukrainian media portraying Surzhyk as "*linguistic trash*", "*weed*", "*surrogate*", or a "*mass-produced low-quality product*" that allegedly undermines the language, thought processes, and the individual as a whole.

Media headlines vividly illustrate this framing:

"*Surzhyk: linguistic trash or the language of the future*"[a] (Krym Realii, 17 October 2017);
"*Surzhyk is a weed that hinders the flourishing of the language*"[b] (Espreso.tv, 21 June 2020);
"*Surzhyk harms Ukrainians no less than tanks in Donbas*"[c] (Gazeta.ua, 20 April 2020).

[a] (Rus.) *Суржик: речевой мусор или язык будущего*.
[b] (Ukr.) *Суржик – це бур'ян, який заважає розквіту мови.*
[c] (Ukr.) *Суржик шкодить українцям не менше, ніж танки на Донбасі*.

At the core of these views is the perception of Surzhyk as a consequence of the Russification of Ukraine during the Soviet era, when language policy aimed to displace Ukrainian from active use. This explanation has become an axiom and has been firmly entrenched and widely disseminated in the media:

"*The forceful imposition of the Russian language and the systematic suppression of Ukrainian gave rise to the phenomenon of Surzhyk*"[a] (TSN, 16 August 2024);
"*Surzhyk can be called a rudiment of colonial domination*" [b] (Espreso.tv, 21 June 2020).

[a] (Ukr.) *Насильне нав'язування російської мови і постійне придушення української породило таке явище, як суржик.*
[b] (Ukr.) *Суржик можна назвати рудиментом колоніального панування.*

These media narratives have contributed to widespread calls to combat Surzhyk, which is frequently portrayed as an obstacle to the development and purity of the Ukrainian language. This sentiment is reflected in headlines such as:

"*Surzhyk and purity, or why it is considered 'disgusting'*" [a] (Ukrinform, 21 February 2022);
"*Root out the linguistic weed: which Surzhyk words should be forgotten immediately*" [b] (Channel 24, 19 May 2023);
"*How can we rid ourselves of this linguistic villain?*" [c] (TeachMe, 20 September 2024).

[a] (Ukr.) *Суржик і чистота, або Чому це "відвратітєльно".*
[b] (Ukr.) *Політь мовний бур'ян: які суржикові слова треба негайно забути.*
[c] (Ukr.) *Як же позбутись цього шкідника.*

Such representations can be effectively interpreted through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of the linguistic market. This framework posits that symbolic power within a linguistic community privileges the standard language, while deviations, such as Surzhyk, are systematically devalued and stigmatised. Consequently, Surzhyk has traditionally been marked as a sign of linguistic subordination, relegating its speakers to a marginal position within the sociolinguistic hierarchy.

This perspective has been further reinforced by prominent scholars and public intellectuals in Ukraine. Larysa Masenko, a leading sociolinguist frequently cited in national media, consistently characterises Surzhyk as a "pathogenic" phenomenon that, in her view, threatens the stability and normative functioning of the Ukrainian linguistic system. As she asserts: "*The state must finally address the problems arising from the widespread mixing of Ukrainian and Russian, which threatens citizens' linguistic competence*" (Radio Svoboda, 7 December 2015).

Similarly, Pavlo Hrytsenko, director of the Institute of the Ukrainian Language at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, adopts a categorical stance on Surzhyk: "*It is enough that we demean ourselves. Whenever we talk about the Ukrainian language, we inevitably mention Surzhyk. And what is Surzhyk? Surzhyk is evidence of a person's failure to work on self-improvement*" (Espreso.tv, 21 June 2020).

Moreover, the renowned writer Oksana Zabuzhko characterises Surzhykisation as a form of linguistic and cognitive degradation, referring to Surzhyk itself as a "*half-breed language*" (Gazeta.ua, 1 March 2013).

Some prominent Ukrainian politicians have also expressed negative views about Surzhyk from various public platforms. For example, People's Deputy and linguist Iryna Farion openly stated, "*Using Surzhyk is like going to work in a dirty skirt, dirty pants, and unpolished shoes. Who wants to walk around in dirty clothes?*" (Ukrainian News, 4 March 2013).

The dissemination of such and similar opinions regarding the pathogenic potential of Surzhyk has reinforced strongly negative connotations of this phenomenon in mass media discourse, which inevitably affected its perception by the broader public. However, according to our observations, this picture has begun to change following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Since the onset of the war, Ukrainians have started to distance themselves from the "Russian world" and to develop a heightened awareness of their own linguistic identity (for more details, see Kulyk, 2024a, 2024b; Matveieva, 2023; Matveyeva & Tsar, 2024; Ruda, 2024; Yaremko & Levchuk, 2023; Zeller & Hentschel, 2024), becoming increasingly convinced that "language matters."

Having realised their distinctive features from the Russians, more and more Ukrainians began to actively express the classic opposition "us vs them" (for more on this, see Sokolova, 2023), which led to the formation of the idea of Surzhyk as a marker of "Ukrainianness", a marker of "ours", which should not be embarrassing, through which one can even gradually switch to Ukrainian-language behaviour.

This discursive shift exemplifies what Michael Silverstein (2003) termed *indexical inversion*, whereby previously stigmatised linguistic forms acquire new, positive indexical meanings. Once perceived as a symptom of linguistic degradation, Surzhyk is now often understood as an authentic expression of "Ukrainianness", especially among speakers transitioning from Russian to Ukrainian. Even former critics, such as politician Iryna Farion, have softened their stance, stating: "*People! Even the worst Surzhyk is better than the Moscovian language. Ukrainian unites. Moscovian kills*" (Argument, 13 September 2024).

Cultural and public figures have echoed these sentiments. Ukrainian writer Yuriy Andrukhovych describes Surzhyk as "*a compromise*" (Zmist, 24 November 2023), while Larisa Nitsoi highlights Surzhyk's positive role in reversing previous linguistic shifts towards Russian, stating: "*any Surzhyk is better than the Moscovian language in Ukraine*" (FM Galicia, 5 February 2024). In her opinion,

> "*Today Surzhyk emerges as people transition from the Moscovian language back to Ukrainian. Yet this is a reversed process. Then, Surzhyk was negative because it was a transition to Moscow. Now, although it seems to be the same Surzhyk, it is a positive process, since it represents a return to the Ukrainian language, to your own, to your native root. Such Surzhyk pleases*" (FM Galicia, 5 February 2024)

Similarly, Professor Svitlana Kokotiukha uses a metaphor comparing Surzhyk to "*house slippers*", illustrating how language use flexibly adapts to context:

> "*An educated person clearly understands that in formal situations one should use the standard literary language. But when you come home and can change from high-heeled shoes into cozy house slippers, you may likewise switch to another form of speech in an informal setting – using dialectal or Surzhyk words*" (Hrechka, 13 November 2023).

The author Yevgeniya Kuznetsova encourages people "*not to be afraid of Surzhyk, Russisms, or linguistic distortion*" (NV, 20 February 2024). Prominent Ukrainian literary scholar Rostyslav Semkiv aptly

notes that today "*Surzhyk is no longer perceived as the language of a diseased brain incapable of mastering literary Ukrainian*" (Suspil′ne: Kul′tura, 6 March 2023).

This discursive revalorisation extends to cultural production, where Surzhyk increasingly occupies a prominent place in music, film, and literature, being embraced as a folk or artistic vernacular. For example, the band Kurgan & Agregat's album *Quantum Surzhyk* declares: "*Surzhyk is more Ukrainian than Russian. So, there is no need to be embarrassed about it. Better in Surzhyk than in Russian*" (SKVOT, 18 July 2024).

Antonio Lukich's 2023 film *Luxembourg, Luxembourg*, featuring characters speaking naturalistic Surzhyk, was praised for its linguistic authenticity, with critics noting that "*thanks to such films, Surzhyk is gradually being legitimised as a normal and natural way of representing a man of the people*" (Ukrainian Week, 22 September 2023).

The 2023 publication of *SMT Surzhyk*, the first Ukrainian literary collection of texts in Surzhyk, also triggered media attention. In interviews, its editors emphasised Surzhyk's emotional and expressive capacity, its importance, and significant value potential:

> "*It was important for us to show that Surzhyk can express joy, pain, and the most intimate experiences no worse than literary Ukrainian. It is rich, lively, and extremely sensitive. […] Surzhyk is an invisible part of Ukrainian culture, and we would really like the stigma to fall from it. It would be great if people were not ashamed to be themselves*" (Suspil′ne: Kul′tura, 1 June 2023).

As we can see, in many contexts, Surzhyk has acquired and expanded a set of positive evaluative characteristics, gradually becoming a positive phenomenon described as "*multifaceted*", "*alive*", "*highly expressive*", "*unique*", "*popular*", "*appropriate and in its place*", and a "*linguistic island of freedom*":

> "*Surzhyk is multifaceted, alive, and highly expressive*" (Suspil′ne: Kul′tura, 1 June 2023); "*The renaissance of Surzhyk in modern Ukrainian culture*" (Ukrainian Week, 22 September 2023);
> "*A linguistic island of freedom*" (Spilne, 4 July 2023);
> "*Fighting katsapstvo and preserving one's own*" (Suspil′ne: Kul′tura, 21 March 2023).

The use of Surzhyk in music and literature has become, according to many cultural scientists, "a continuation of the aesthetic course towards 'new sincerity', thanks to which Surzhyk has become a marker of frankness, humor, irony, and simplicity":

> "*Sincerity in contemporary art is a certain reaction to the all-pervasive irony of postmodernism, […] therefore, a kind of emotional frankness and simplicity is precisely the latest trend towards a truthful reproduction of life as it is. At the same time, this sincere Surzhyk in songs and films is also an instrument of banter, and therefore, irony*" (Ukrainian Week, 22 September 2023).

By broadcasting such views, the media have increasingly contributed to shaping the perception of Surzhyk as a real and widespread phenomenon inherent in the everyday speech practices of many Ukrainians, rather than as a marginal or deficient code. As one commentary notes:

> "*No matter what, Surzhyk is a fact of modern life. Therefore, its affirmation in pop culture and the media is quite natural, given the desire not to embellish life and not to multiply stereotypes, but finally to try to show Ukrainians a real, modern and speaking Ukraine*" (Ukrainian Week, 22 September 2023).

In doing so, the media contribute to the formation of a new ideology that legitimises Surzhyk as an authentic and meaningful linguistic resource. This positive re-evaluation has also fostered a growing recognition that Surzhyk should not be dismissed as a linguistic deviation but approached as a subject worthy of scholarly inquiry. Increasingly, calls are being made for research aimed at understanding its nature and communicative-functional features. For example: "*When emotions subside, the time for scholarly research arrives – and there is much to explore. Surzhyk is a unique phenomenon*" (Ukrinform, 21 February 2022).

What was once primarily associated with linguistic deficiency, lack of education, and the influence of the Soviet or "Russian world" is now increasingly portrayed as a natural, authentic, and valuable element of everyday Ukrainian speech. Media narratives highlight its functional role in easing the transition from Russian to Ukrainian, its emotional and expressive richness, and its rootedness in folk and popular culture. Furthermore, Surzhyk is no longer seen merely as an unavoidable linguistic compromise but rather

as a marker of creativity, adaptability, and sincerity – qualities that resonate with the broader cultural shift towards "new sincerity" in postcolonial Ukrainian society. At the same time, this discursive revalorisation remains ambivalent: despite the emphasis on positive meanings, tensions between linguistic normativity and hybridity persist, reflecting ongoing societal debates about language purity, national identity, and the boundaries of what is considered "proper" Ukrainianness.

4 Conclusion

This study reveals key trends in the transformation of linguistic attitudes and the sociolinguistic status of Surzhyk amid Russia's full-scale war. These changes are manifested both at the level of individual language practices and within broader media discourses, reflecting shifts in language ideologies and communicative behaviour.

The war triggered the reassessment of Surzhyk – a linguistic form that has historically been stigmatised as low-prestige, "incorrect", rural, or marginal. Under the new sociopolitical circumstances, Surzhyk is undergoing functional and ideological reassessment. This mixed Ukrainian–Russian variety is increasingly serving as a marker of authenticity, Ukrainian identity, and symbolic resistance, acquiring new indexical meanings. Such dynamics illustrate the phenomenon of indexical inversion, whereby a linguistic form previously associated with social marginality is reinterpreted as a positive, legitimate, and, in certain contexts, even desirable communicative resource.

One of the notable trends is the growing tolerance and acceptability of Surzhyk among various groups of speakers, including former Russian speakers who, since the onset of the invasion, have increasingly adopted Surzhyk in certain communicative situations. For these individuals, Surzhyk often functions as a transitional code that facilitates a gradual and socially supported shift away from the language of the aggressor. This reflects not only a change in linguistic practices but also a broader reassessment of language identity during wartime.

Surzhyk is becoming increasingly visible in the public sphere, transcending its former role as an exclusively private or domestic form of speech. Within the collective consciousness, it is progressively perceived as a "native" and "authentic" code that functions as a marker of solidarity, trust, and collective identity among communities facing the shared challenges of war. This shift reflects broader transformations in the social and ideological status of Surzhyk, underscoring its emerging role in fostering social cohesion and expressing a sense of belonging.

In media discourse, the set of positive attributes associated with Surzhyk has expanded: it is now portrayed as "native", "genuine", and "vibrant", which has contributed to a re-evaluation of its axiological status as a formerly pathological phenomenon. This, in turn, has facilitated the emergence of Surzhyk in the media space as a marker of "insider" identity – something that should no longer be a source of shame, but rather a means through which speakers can express an authentic sense of "Ukrainianness".

The use of Surzhyk as a code of resistance and as a symbol of "one's own" is acquiring profound ideological significance. Drawing on the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality, this transformation underscores the fact that the prestige and legitimacy of linguistic forms are socially constructed and historically contingent. In the wartime context, Surzhyk is gradually gaining the status of symbolic capital – a tool of cultural resistance against Russian aggression. In this respect, Surzhyk can be regarded as a potential instrument of linguistic decolonisation, contributing to the gradual transformation of language identity in favour of Ukrainian.

Thus, Surzhyk emerges not merely as a convenient means of everyday communication but as a meaningful semiotic act in which language, ideology, identity, and resistance become mutually reinforcing. Its changing status demonstrates how political and social crises can act as catalysts for discursive and ideological transformations, shaping new models of language behaviour and perceptions of national belonging.

At the same time, the shift in public attitudes towards Surzhyk in the context of the full-scale war can be seen as shaped by the complex interplay of psychological, political, and identity-related mechanisms. Psychologically, the war has intensified the need for in-group solidarity, encouraging speakers to use language forms that assert Ukrainian identity rather than linguistic correctness. Politically, the devaluation of

Russian as the aggressor's language has opened discursive space for the rethinking of alternative linguistic forms, including Surzhyk, as an expression of resistance to the hostile world. In terms of identity, this re-evaluation reflects an ongoing process of reinterpreting Ukrainian national identity as one that encompasses regional and hybrid practices, rather than being reduced to a monolingual and standardised model. These mechanisms indicate that the transformation of linguistic attitudes and the changing sociolinguistic status of Surzhyk are not merely reactive responses to external conflict but a part of deeper processes of identity formation and ideological change.

The trends identified here represent preliminary contours of broader sociolinguistic processes that warrant further interdisciplinary investigation. To fully grasp the long-term implications and trajectory of Surzhyk within Ukraine's dynamic linguistic landscape, extensive empirical research based on representative data is essential. Such studies will enable a more precise evaluation of the potential and dynamics of mixed language practices both during and beyond wartime.

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