

Recenzió

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Larysa Masenko: Surzhyk – Mizh movoju i jazykom (Surzhyk – Between Language and Tongue)

Kyiv: Kyjevo-Mohiljans'ka Akademija, 2011, 135 p.

Surzhyk – Mizh movoju i jazykom (*Surzhyk – Between Language and Tongue*¹) is a Ukrainian book about *surzhyk*, a unique linguistic and cultural phenomenon, a range of Ukrainian-Russian mixed language varieties, their development, and modern usage. Unlike most of the literature on *surzhyk*, this book does not focus on one aspect of the phenomenon; it contains chapters on its history, development, sociolinguistic peculiarities, usage in modern Ukrainian literature and social life, as well as some predictions on the further development of *surzhyk* and its effect on the standard Ukrainian language.

The book contains nine interconnected chapters and is aimed for students, linguists and Ukrainian language teachers, but since it describes *surzhyk* from a number of perspectives, it might as well be interesting to a broader audience. The book has not been translated into English, so I will attempt to include in this review as much useful information and interesting facts from the book as possible.

The first chapter specifies the problems with defining the phenomenon of *surzhyk*. According to the author, the term itself reflects the national and social nature of the phenomenon, since the word *surzhyk* originally meant a mixture of two different types of flour (wheat and rye, rye and barley etc.) of a poor quality. It combines two elements of meaning – the notion of mixing two different substances and the low quality of the resulting mixture.

A similar phenomenon is present in the Belarusian language as well. It is called *trasianka*, after a mixed kettle feed product of low quality. According to some linguists, the Belarusian term has been created analogically to the Ukrainian *surzhyk*.

The second meaning of the word *surzhyk* has been known since the 1930's. According to Shevelov, he first heard this word for the Ukrainian-Russian mixed language from a student. But it is not known when and how exactly the word for mixed flour became a metaphorical word for a mixed language. Some linguists have recently used the term to describe other mixed languages, Rybalko, 2010 refers to the Rusyn language as a peculiar “Slovakian-

¹ The original title of the book is deliberately ambiguous and is based on play upon words: the word *mova* means language in Ukrainian, while the word *yazyk* means tongue in Ukrainian and both language and tongue in Russian. So, the actual meaning of the title is: *between language (Ukrainian) and language (Russian)*.

Russian-Ukrainian *surzhyk*². Azhniuk, 1999 describes the Ukrainian language spoken by immigrants in Canada as a “Ukrainian-English *surzhyk*”.

Hrytsenko, 2003 extends the definition of *surzhyk* and uses this term not only for the mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, but also for mixtures of Ukrainian with Polish, Romanian, Slovak and Hungarian^{3,4} spoken in the regions close to the state borders.

In this chapter, Masenko points out that *surzhyk*, unlike the regional varieties of Ukrainian, is spoken in a number of regions and is a result of a prolonged contact of a dominant language (i.e. Russian) with a subordinate, oppressed language (Ukrainian and, in case of *trasianka*, Belorussian). Also, it is based on the Ukrainian language and is spoken in Ukraine, which is why Yurii Shevelov treated it as a variety of Ukrainian.

A possibility of defining *surzhyk* as a pidgin or creole language is also mentioned in this chapter, but the author rejects it, since those are usually combinations of unrelated languages. However, the social and historical background of *surzhyk* is similar to that of the pidgin and creole languages.

Since the research on the Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism had been prohibited during the Soviet era, linguists had been ignoring the ‘by-products’ of this bilingualism as well, though examples of a language variety similar to the modern *surzhyk* were used as early as the 18th century (in literary texts and chronicles), but they became widely used only during the Soviet years.

According to Masenko, it is not easy to define the exact, or at least approximate time of the development of *surzhyk*. As Shevelov pointed out, the history of *surzhyk* has not been written yet. It was used in the plays of Kotliarevskyj in the late 18th and early 19th century. But can the term *surzhyk* be used to describe the mixed Ukrainian-Polish language varieties of the 16-17th century? And can we say whether the mixture of Church Slavonic and Old Ukrainian is a form of *surzhyk* as well? Both Shevelov and Masenko leave these questions unanswered.

In the second chapter of the book, the author provides some interesting facts about the development and the expansion of *surzhyk*.

She dates the appearance of the first varieties of this mixed language form back to the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century, when the Russian assimilatory policy prevented the further development of the Old Ukrainian written language. Russian became the official language of the government and the educational system, which led to an interesting phenomenon – local officials in the districts of Ukraine developed a peculiar spoken language, in which archaic elements of Church Slavonic, as well as terms and expressions from the Russian language were connected with Ukrainian phonology, morphology and some elements of the lexicon. This language variety was a subject of mockery in the Ukrainian literature⁵ of the time. Though the elements of early *surzhyk* were inserted into the speech of

² The author of the book under review refers to Rusyn as an “artificial language, which is currently being created (constructed) for Subcarpathia”. This is not completely correct, since there have been written Rusyn texts created in the early 20th century, not to mention those from the 18th and 19th centuries written in some older versions of this language/dialect (there is still no consensus on the status of Rusyn in Ukraine, although the majority of foreign linguists recognize it as a separate language).

³ The varieties of Ukrainian spoken in and around the Hungarian-speaking regions of Subcarpathia contain not as many Hungarian words – the variety of Hungarian spoken here contains a lot more Ukrainian and Russian words – this phenomenon has been widely examined by Subcarpathian Hungarian linguists.

⁴ The type of *surzhyk* spoken in Subcarpathia is even more confusing than the Ukrainian-Russian *surzhyk* – it contains elements of Subcarpathian dialects (pronominal clitics, words of Slovak, Hungarian, German origin), which, since the Soviet era, have been mixed with the original, Ukrainian-Russian *surzhyk*.

⁵ The most famous example of the early usage of *surzhyk* in literary texts was *Enejida* by Ivan Kotliarevskyj, a parody of Vergilius’ *Aeneas*.

the characters with humorous intent, these texts are also valuable sources of linguistic data for researchers interested in *surzhyk*.

The tsar's army in Russia was also an institution of "russianizing" the ukrainian-speaking population – during the years of service the Ukrainian men partially forgot their native language and spoke Russian, which turned into a variety of *surzhyk* upon their return home, as they were trying to speak Ukrainian again.

During the 18th-19th century *surzhyk* was spoken mainly by Russian officials working in Ukraine, who tried to adjust their speech to the language spoken by the rural population, i.e. Ukrainian.

By the beginning of the 20th century, *surzhyk* was spoken not only by the officials, but by some of the rural population as well, especially those who intended to move or had already moved to the cities.

The communist revolution of 1917 demolished the social hierarchy of the Russian Empire, a period of "ukrainization" began in the Ukrainian cities. But, it was too brief to make *surzhyk* less popular. According to Masenko, the Soviet government realized that the cultural renaissance of Ukrainian in the late 1920's might lead to the awakening of the fight for independence, so "ukrainization" was shut down violently. From the 1930's Ukrainian was no longer taught at universities and was taught only at some secondary schools. Ukrainian was no longer the language of science and administration in the cities.

It is important to point out that the "deukrainization" was not limited to the ban of the usage of Ukrainian in the most important areas of social life. The next step was to modify the structure of the standard Ukrainian language, to make it more compatible with the "elder brother", i.e. Russian. Shevelov compared the Russian-Ukrainian dictionary published in 1937 with the earlier version from the 1920's and wrote that "it is obvious that the authors made huge efforts to remove all the hostile-looking words and to include all the revolutionary-sounding ones; they chose (or introduced) words related to Russian and omitted all the synonyms that were not present in Russian". Modern analyses of the dictionaries and translations from the 1920-s and 1930-s confirm Shevelov's observations.

Hofeneder, 2010 illustrated the way the Ukrainian lexicon was narrowed by removing words that were not present in Russian and replacing them with Russian ones by comparing two different Ukrainian translations (from 1932 and 1952) of "Materialism and empirio-criticism" by Lenin. Hofeneder makes an interesting assumption that these translations (since Lenin's works were obligatory readings in all institutions of higher education) might have influenced the spread of *surzhyk*. He points out that the 1952 edition contains a number of forms that later became widely used in *surzhyk*.

The Soviet language policy, by promoting the Russian language, made it easier for the mixed language varieties to unfold, since they were transitional "languages", halfway to the official language. Since Russian remained the main language of the cities, Ukrainian speakers became more and more marginalized, especially after World War II.

However, the rural population continued to speak Ukrainian, only with some minor Russian borrowings, which did not interfere with the Ukrainian syntax and morphology and were merely used when speaking about current affairs.

The third chapter of the book is about the perception of *surzhyk* in consciousness of the population and in the media. Once again, the author points out that the majority of Ukrainian intellectuals consider *surzhyk* a simplified, primitive means of communication. She cites Serbens'ka 1994, who stated that *surzhyk* is dangerous and harmful because it is a parasite of a language which had been developing for centuries.

In one of his essays, Yuriy Andrukhovych, a contemporary Ukrainian writer, comparing the language varieties spoken in Eastern and Western Ukraine, writes that Eastern Ukraine is not bilingual anymore – mostly standard Russian is spoken there and *surzhyk* is “moving” towards the western regions of Ukraine, which are not purely Ukrainian-speaking anymore.

Later in this chapter, Masenko points out that the claim of some linguists and journalists that *surzhyk* has become the prevailing language variety in the communication of the Ukrainian population is incorrect and irrational. She provides data from a research on the linguistic and ethnic structure of Ukraine conducted between 1996 and 1999, as well as between 2000 and 2003. The results show that the proportions of the speakers of mixed Ukrainian-Russian language varieties were 18,2 and 14,7 % respectively.

A survey conducted in 2006 showed that 9,7% of the population stated that the prevailing language variety spoken in their area is *surzhyk*, but only 3,1 per cent of the participants admitted that they speak *surzhyk* themselves. The fact that people are ashamed to admit that they speak this mixed language variety explains why it is an unpopular subject of research among the Ukrainian linguists and why most papers on *surzhyk* deal with its origin and adverse effects on the Ukrainian language and culture instead of the syntactic and morphological peculiarities.

According to the author, the change of the legal status of Ukrainian and its promotion to the level of a state language⁶ made it more prestigious. It became the language of culture, education, legislation and administration in Ukraine, pushing back the expansion of *surzhyk*. During the recent years some words formed with the stem “*surzhyk*” have been used to describe a person who cannot or does not intend to speak Ukrainian properly, it became an insult, which defines a person who does not respect the Ukrainian culture and traditions.

In the fourth chapter of the book, Masenko provides an overview of the history of the research on the Ukrainian-Russian mixed language. She begins the chapter with the explanation of why this phenomenon was not widely analyzed during the Soviet era. The nature of *surzhyk* itself contradicted the propaganda of the communist party, which stated that there is harmony and bilingualism in Ukraine, and the two languages coexist peacefully. The definition in the eleven-volume dictionary of Ukrainian also stated that *surzhyk* is a mix of two languages, but didn't specify which languages. So, the Soviet linguists did not bother to analyze the nature and structure of *surzhyk*, many of them didn't even admit it existed.

An exact definition of *surzhyk* and its dangers for the standard Ukrainian was first given by Antonenko-Davydovych, 1970 in his work titled “*Jak my hovorymo*” (The Way We Speak). His opinion was that it is not normal if a person who doesn't speak Ukrainian and/or Russian properly mixes these languages, their word forms and inflectional paradigms, thus creating a “mutant” language, i.e. *surzhyk*.

In Ukraine, *surzhyk* became a subject of linguistic research only in the 1990's. Serbens'ka was one of the first linguists to analyze this phenomenon. She extended the reasoning of Antonenko-Davydovych and stated that *surzhyk* is a degraded version of Ukrainian, which appeared under the pressure of Russian and pointed out that its negative effect can be observed not only in the development of the Ukrainian language, but also there is a psychological aspect of the phenomenon – it adversely influences the ethnic identity of an individual. Her work “*Antisurzhyk*” was one of the first handbooks and dictionaries contain-

⁶ In Ukraine, official language is referred to as the “state language” (*derzhavna mova*), the term “official language” is used mostly when speaking about other countries' official languages. There have been numerous arguments among linguists and sociologists on the semantic differences (if there are any) between the two adjectives in this context.

ing non-standard, *russianized* word forms and expressions along with their standard Ukrainian equivalents.

The fifth chapter is devoted to bilingualism in general and the peculiarities of *surzhyk* as a side-effect of forced bilingualism. Masenko explains that *surzhyk* is on the opposite side of so-called “bilingualism scale” to the balanced bilingualism. In the mind of a bilingual person, two linguistic systems co-exist independently, which enables the speaker to switch between the two languages freely (code-switching). *Surzhyk* is the exact opposite of code-switching – a speaker of this language variety is unable to distinguish between the elements of the two languages they are using simultaneously, which causes them to mix these elements in a chaotic manner (code-mixing).

Masenko points out that this phenomenon is the type of language-mixing, which occurs when a speaker can't speak a language properly, so they substitute the unknown elements with the ones from their first language. In the case of *surzhyk*, the speakers try to make their speech as close to Russian as possible, which can be noticed mostly on the lexical level. The partial or almost complete usage of Ukrainian phonological and morphological system are due to the poor knowledge of Russian (this, however, does not mean that the speaker has a proper knowledge of standard Ukrainian either).

On the other hand, in the speech of some Ukrainian officials, especially in cities, one can notice certain elements of Russian pronunciation, lexicon and morphology. This is due to their attempts to speak standard Ukrainian while being either native Russian speakers or having been speaking Russian for decades. This so-called linguistic interference, according to Masenko, must not be confused with the usage of *surzhyk*. She disagrees with the statement made by some non-linguists that *surzhyk* may serve as an intermediate language variety for Russian natives studying Ukrainian. Instead, she suggests that the usage of Ukrainian should be encouraged, especially in cities, in order to push back the expansion of *surzhyk*.

In the remaining part of the chapter the author explains the difference between a bilingual speaker and a speaker of *surzhyk*. The speech of a bilingual person is regulated by code-switching, which does not allow them to mix the elements of two languages. A speaker a *surzhyk* lacks this ability, probably due to their poor knowledge of both languages involved in the process, which causes them to mix the two systems randomly.

Masenko states that, to conduct a proper sociolinguistic research on *surzhyk* the phenomena of interference and code-switching described above must be distinguished.

She provides some text samples of *surzhyk* to illustrate the mixing of Ukrainian and Russian words and idioms in the speech of the same person. The chaotic manner of mixing suggests that in the mind of the speaker, the two languages are not distinguished as individual systems – Ukrainian and Russian (or Belorussian and Russian in the case of *trasiianka*) are perceived as a single source of linguistic data, elements of which can be randomly used in everyday communication. This allows some researchers, including Bratski, 2007, to study *surzhyk* and *trasiianka* not as language varieties, but as complexes of idiolects.

Another peculiarity of these mixed language varieties is described in this chapter. Since they evolved from “failed attempts to switch to Russian”, the speakers of *surzhyk* and *trasiianka* subconsciously reject the Ukrainian and Belorussian words which are different from the Russian ones. Thus, *surzhyk* and *trasiianka* are composed of lexical units common with Russian, as well as Russian words used to substitute Ukrainian or Belorussian ones.

Masenko emphasizes the destructive nature of *surzhyk*. She thinks it burns all the bridges between modern Ukrainian and its earlier versions and dialects. It should be interpreted as a result of forced and intense *russification*, a transition from Ukrainian to Russian.

The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology conducted a number of surveys between 1996 and 2003 to create a map of the languages and ethnicities in Ukraine. The overall results of the research revealed the territorial distribution of the *surzhyk*-speaking population, as well as the proportions of native Russian and Ukrainian speakers.

This research proved that *surzhyk* is indeed a transition between the two languages. In the regions where either Ukrainian or Russian is the dominant language, the number of *surzhyk* speakers is relatively small (2,5 % in the Western regions and 9,6 % in the Eastern regions). Central Ukraine appears to be the center of *surzhyk*, because here both Ukrainian and Russian are widely used. These surveys also revealed the tendency of the *surzhyk*-speaking population to switch to the Russian language rather than Ukrainian.

Masenko finishes this chapter with the conclusion that *surzhyk* blurs the standards and rules of the Ukrainian language, which causes the *russianization* of the Ukrainian population, since the majority of its speakers are of Ukrainian ethnicity (according to the results of the research mentioned above, in Ukraine, 14% of Ukrainians and only 5% of Russians speak *surzhyk*).

The sixth chapter might as well be included into the previous one, since the author continues the topic of the previous chapter, emphasizing the adverse effect of *surzhyk* even with the title of the chapter: From Half-Language to a Cultureless Identity.

Although *surzhyk* was formed on the basis of Ukrainian, the reason it appeared was that the majority of the native Ukrainian speakers had to face the worthlessness and subordination of their language – it was not allowed to speak Ukrainian in any official institution. The main motivation of a person speaking *surzhyk* was to make their language as similar to the dominating Russian language as possible, so that any native Russian speaker could understand them. This led to the subconscious selection of Ukrainian words common with Russian, avoiding their Ukrainian synonyms unknown to the Russian speaker. In the eyes of the Ukrainian linguists these attempts of a native Ukrainian speaker to conform with the Russian speaker by simplifying their native language is a sign of disrespect and loss of attachment to their native language and culture as well. Masenko provides some examples from interviews with *surzhyk* speakers to prove that they are not as attached to their Ukrainian ethnicity as the speakers of standard Ukrainian. She argues that, according to the Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis one's perception of reality and the environment is influenced by language, so without a proper native language one cannot have a proper ethnic identity. According to Fedorchuk, 2004, this is the reason why *surzhyk* must be clearly distinguished from bilingualism. The inability to speak either of the two languages is the reason why the speakers of *surzhyk* basically do not belong either to the Ukrainian or to the Russian ethnicity. One might assume the existence of a combined cognitive basis in the mind of such a person, which is composed of fragments of Ukrainian and Russian and makes them representatives of an unidentified culture. Fedorchuk refers to them as "*ethnomarginals*". Kis', 2002 defines *ethnomarginals* as individuals stuck between two cultures, two languages and not attached to either of them.

In the remaining part of the chapter, Masenko emphasizes the fact that the policy of *russification* has always had a stronger effect on illiterate and uneducated individuals, especially in the Soviet times, when ignorance was considered a guarantee of political loyalty. She also points out that *surzhyk* does not contain any Ukrainian swearwords and curses, only Russian vulgar expressions, which are often used by influential television and media personalities who thus contribute to the entry of *surzhyk* and Russian vulgar speech into the Ukrainian mass culture.

She concludes that the proportion of individuals with “an unclear lingual behavior” is around 15-20% of the population of Ukraine, which leads to an overall instability of the situation in the country, since these individuals can “switch between ethnic identities depending on the political situation”.

The seventh chapter contains a detailed description of the expansion of *surzhyk* through media, television and mass culture during the Soviet era. It contains a lot of references to television shows and films of the time. I will not describe them in detail here, since they may be uninteresting to the readers who are not familiar with the Soviet culture.

According to the author, it is not a secret that the communist regime tended to distort reality and propagandize stereotypes to manipulate the population. For example, in the Soviet mass culture, the Ukrainian language and culture were presented as secondary and worthless, a typical image of a Ukrainian speaker was, in fact, an uneducated speaker of *surzhyk*, a simpleton unable to survive without the assistance of a smarter and wiser Russian individual, which led to the common misconception that Ukrainian language is almost identical to Russian, only simpler and not suitable for poetry, science and not worth studying.

Masenko continues that after the change of regime the Russian mass culture based on the Soviet heritage continued its expansion in Ukraine and continued to push back the progress of Ukrainian art and culture. *Surzhyk* was widely used in the same way it had been used earlier by the communist propaganda. The most confusing is the fact that *surzhyk* was and is used to portray Ukrainian characters, uneducated simpletons in films and television programs broadcast on Ukrainian television, while the Russian-speaking characters are the educated and intelligent ones. This, according to Masenko, has the same adverse effect on the Ukrainian language and culture as the policy of *russification* during the decades before the independence of Ukraine.

The eighth chapter of the book is devoted to the role of *surzhyk* in modern Ukrainian literature. Proper sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic research might reveal the long-term effects of *russification* in the Ukrainian society, but since such a research has not been conducted yet, this gap is partially filled by the works of Ukrainian writers of the second half of the 20th century, especially the ones that show the social disaster experienced by the rural Ukrainian-speaking population as it found itself isolated from the *Russianized* cities and the attempts of the younger generations to start new lives in these cities. According to Masenko, in such literary works one can observe the evolution of a *surzhyk*-speaking individual: a person from a rural area who tries to assimilate with the Russian-speaking urban population, considers the dominant language superior to their native language and eventually ends up speaking a strange mixed language.

In the works of some modern Ukrainian writers *surzhyk* is the subject of mockery, it is spoken by uneducated people who are either unable to speak standard Ukrainian or are convinced that they, in fact, speak proper Ukrainian. Some extreme cases of the usage of *surzhyk* for humorous purposes include vulgar expressions as well. Les’ Podervianskyj, a well-known and controversial Ukrainian comedian is known for using strong language in his books and performances.

The final chapter of the book sums up the previous chapters and contains some predictions on the further development of *surzhyk*. Masenko emphasizes that the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state and the status of Ukrainian as the official language changed the hierarchy of the two languages in Ukraine pushing back Russian to the status of a minority language, at least officially. She agrees with Bracki, 2009, who predicts that in the future *surzhyk* will become less popular and will eventually disappear, if the system of education and mass media will switch to Ukrainian.

This, according to the conclusion of the book, is not likely to happen in the nearest future, considering the Russian-friendly policy of the Ukrainian state leaders.

It should be noted here, that the book under review was published in 2011, and significant changes have taken place since then. The events of recent years pushed back the expansion of Russian, Ukrainian is becoming more popular and fashionable, while Russian is often considered the language of the enemy, though it is spoken by the majority of the population in Eastern Ukraine. During the recent years, *surzhyk* has been portrayed in the media as a sign of poor education, an earmark of a person without a cultural heritage, which, in the long run, may lead to the disappearance of *surzhyk*.

Apart from providing a detailed and comprehensive overview of the development of *surzhyk*, this book also explains why *surzhyk* is not a prestigious subject of linguistic research in Ukraine – it is an undesired reminder of the Soviet propaganda people want to get rid of.

Masenko emphasizes many times that *surzhyk* is syntactically and morphologically based on the Ukrainian language, but does not provide any details. Despite being very informative about the development and effects of *surzhyk*, in almost every chapter of the book, she seems to be biased and implies that *surzhyk* is not worth being researched by syntacticians, and all we need is a proper sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic research to prove the adverse effects of *surzhyk* on the Ukrainian culture and be happy later, if it disappears. If one looks at the changes in Ukrainian society that occurred during the Soviet decades from the viewpoint of a Ukrainian intellectual forced to use Russian and watch their native language become marginalized and substituted by either Russian, or a peculiar mixed language variety, this biased attitude may be understood. However, it does not mean that such a unique phenomenon must not be explored in all of its aspects, including the morphological and syntactic peculiarities.

Fortunately, in recent years, *surzhyk* has been an attractive area of research for foreign linguists and finally a detailed research on its syntax and morphology has been conducted. In her Ph.D. thesis, Kent 2012 provides a detailed analysis of the morphosyntactic peculiarities of *surzhyk*, which are only briefly mentioned in this book. She analyzed a significant amount of spoken data, distinguished *Surzhyk Proper* from cases of Russian-Ukrainian code-switching and lexical borrowing, and analyzed the internal structure of *surzhyk*, i.e. the combination of Ukrainian morphosyntax with both Russian and Ukrainian lexical items.

Other interesting recent works on *surzhyk* include Bernsand 2001, who analyzes the Ukrainian nationalist language ideology and its relation to *surzhyk*, Bilaniuk 2017, on the language use trends in modern Ukraine and, of course Bilaniuk 2005, a book on the relations of two closely related languages with different statuses in a bilingual country, in which the history and ideology of *surzhyk* is traced and described in detail.

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