

The formal and the informal: exploring ‘Ukrainian’ education in Ukraine, scenes from Odessa

Abel Polese*

Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

The collapse of the Communist bloc in 1989 and then of the Soviet Union in 1991 has presented unique challenges to the educational systems in place during socialist times, and the ensuing transition in Ukraine is no exception. The introduction of Ukrainian as the sole state language when a high number of citizens still prefer to use Russian has generated some interesting paradoxes to explore. This paper surveys the diffusion of Ukrainian-medium education in Odessa, a city of one million people in the south of the country. The introduction of Ukrainian as the language of instruction in schools was a result of a nation-building project when the country gained independence in 1991. This gave way to a peculiar contradiction: whilst all Ukrainian schools are supposed to use Ukrainian as the sole means of teaching, including Ukrainian textbooks, a number of schools have adopted unofficially a dual-language approach. Thus Ukrainian functions as the language for all written communication while Russian is used for communication among students and teachers in formal and informal contexts.

Introduction: language and schools in post-independent Ukraine

The collapse of the Communist bloc in 1989 and of the Soviet Union in 1991 left a void in the educational policies of the former Soviet republics. Where the Soviet educational system had been introduced and consolidated over time, governments were now facing the challenge of having to restructure this and adapt it to national and market necessities. In several countries, the number of school years was extended from 10 to 12 grades, curricula were adapted to national priorities and the language(s) of instruction were altered. As a consequence, Russian lost the predominance it previously had in several cases. Transition on this scale is unique, presenting several challenges specific to the domestic context. One of the most divisive issues is the dichotomy of formal–informal and state–people’s language use. In Ukraine, the introduction of Ukrainian as the sole state language and language of instruction, despite a high number of citizens preferring to use Russian, generated some paradoxes.

In 1989, several Soviet republics passed a law on national language. With the exception of Belarus, this law upgraded the national languages to first place and demoted Russian to second. In Ukraine, the law introduced a number of measures to limit the use of Russian, making Ukrainian the main language of public spheres (Janmaat 2000, 59). Ever since, the language of instruction was determined by the government. Citizens were allowed to be educated in other languages when a consistent minority was present. In addition, Russian and Ukrainian became obligatory in school and universities.

*Email: a.polese@ed.ac.uk

Practice did not automatically follow these policy measures, and the first two years saw little change (Arel 1995, 600). This changed in February 1991 when a programme for the development of Ukrainian was launched. Given the predominance of Russian in the south and east of the country, these regions were offered a further ten years to comply with the programme. Russian-speaking Ukrainians there were encouraged to study in the ‘national language’, i.e. that of their parents.

In addition, all Ukrainian language schools that had become Russian during Soviet times were to reintroduce a full programme in Ukrainian within one year. As a complementary measure, newly established schools (lyceums, gymnasia or colleges, elite schools allowing access to university education without an entrance test) could deliver education only in Ukrainian. These schools were given the highest priority for receiving Ukrainian language textbooks.

Following the election in 1994 of President Leonid Kuchma, who succeeded Leonid Kravchuk, the status of Ukrainian as the sole language of state was anchored in the 1996 constitution. According to new regulations Russian language and literature were gradually phased out in schools. The use of Russian as a means of teaching was no longer an option from 1997–1998 for those schools registered as Ukrainian. In Russian schools, Russian as a medium of instruction was kept while the number of teaching hours in Ukrainian was increased. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian educational sector inherited the strong centralisation of the previous Soviet system (Stepanenko 1999), and schools were expected to work according to central directives with little autonomy in the choice of texts and programmes (Janmaat 2000, 71). Russian schools were now referred to as ‘non-Ukrainian’, fitting the category of minority schools.

Regardless of their native language and their position regarding the national language, many parents are seen to prefer a Ukrainian education which would secure better economic opportunities for their children, as opposed to a Russian one that would preclude access to top-ranking jobs where proficiency in the two languages is required (Shevel 2002).

The school statistics changed accordingly: during the period from 1991–2000 there was a 25% growth of Ukrainian-medium pre-schools (from 51% to 76%). Schools followed the same shifting pattern in the same period of time, with an increase by 21% (from 49% to 70%). Exceptions are schools in the predominantly Russian-speaking regions of the country, where the percentages remained at lower levels, as follows: Odessa (47%); Zaporizhzhia (45%); Luhansk (17%); Donetsk (14%); the Republic of Crimea (0.8%) (UCEPS 2002, 5; Kuts 2004, 5; see Figure 1).

Although the measures touching on language use are the most visible changes that occurred, they are not the only alterations that are envisaged. School programmes and textbooks were being modified, and subjects were introduced such as ‘native history and culture’ and ‘native language’.¹ This proposition apparently aimed to increase Ukrainian language literacy but also served to anchor national identity (see Polese and Wylegala 2008a, 2008b). School policies of the first post-independence years seem to suggest that national elites were intent on gathering a Ukrainian nation around the Ukrainian language. This is in accordance with the official discourse, which has raised Ukrainian to the level of state language needing to be preserved and developed while the country’s other languages were given minority status (Ukrainian Constitution 1996).

However, taking a deeper look, policy and practice of a widespread Ukrainian-medium education strongly differs in some parts of the country. An indicator for this is the linguistic composition of the country (see Tables 1 and 2). According to a number



Figure 1. Map of Ukraine.

Source: *The World Factbook* (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>)

of surveys (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2001; Khmelko 2004), southern and eastern regions host a high percentage of citizens who prefer to use Russian in daily life.² Schools in those regions, while duly filling in all the documents in Ukrainian, adopt Ukrainian textbooks and claim to teach every subject in Ukrainian, with Russian functioning as the main language for informal communication. Because the boundary between formal and informal communication is quite fluid, some work meetings and most school instructions can easily be delivered in Russian which is equated to other minority languages like Bulgarian or Moldovan, according to the 1996 Constitution.

Table 1. Language and identity in Ukraine.

Language/identity	Ukrainians	Russians	Other	Total
Ukrainian	71.3%	2.8%	7.8%	54.4%
Russian	14.9%	87.6%	36.6%	30.4%
Ukrainian and Russian (<i>surzhyk</i>)	13.6%	9.5%	6.3%	12.4%
Other	0.2%	0.1%	49.3%	2.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Khmelko 2004.

Table 2. Historical comparison of the composition of the population in Ukraine.

	1991–1994	1995–1999	2000–2003
Ukrainians (Ukrainophones)	41.2%	46.3%	45.4%
Ukrainians (Russophones)	32.6%	28.2%	30.9%
Russians (Russophones)	19.7%	17.0%	16.5%
Other groups	6.5%	8.5%	7.2%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Khmelko 2004.

Theoretical framework and methodology

This paper explores the practical dimension of educational policy in Ukraine, especially regarding its linguistic aspects and the contribution such practices could offer for the development of a Ukrainian national identity. In surveying the challenges and issues that can arise during the transition from a Soviet model of education to a Ukrainian one, two aims are envisaged. First, the study wants to shed light on the way local agents and agencies deal with political instructions delivered from the centre to the periphery, often in a standardised form that tends to neglect regional peculiarities. Second, it explores the way a citizen–state relationship can evolve when the practice of the state gets modified locally and the challenges experienced in education at the local level.

In doing so, this essay concentrates on the role of teachers as mediators of a national discourse shaped by the political elites. In their communication with local students, colleagues and the local population, teachers are captured between two positions: on the one hand they are supposed to implement the instructions that the state is delivering to all citizens and follow school policies as proposed in the capital Kiev. On the other, they are also individuals with personal preferences and a margin of manoeuvre that leave them with choices on how to reach the goals set by the state (Chanet 1996).

While showing the apparent contradictions of a ‘Ukrainian education’ in Odessa, this paper interprets the scenario along a dual theoretical framework: looking at the differences that manifest themselves between policy and practice, the focus is on the ‘dilemma of agencies’ in Ukraine, for state actors and agents have to mediate between the Ministry and the citizens. Then drawing on identity theory, in particular the relationship between language and identity, it will be suggested that in proposing Ukrainian as the sole state language the official discourse is contravened by practice, where use of both Russian and Ukrainian is allowed in public spaces and official contexts.

In this respect it can be argued that deviation from the official path does not imply contestation of the instructions coming from above. On the contrary, it represents a way for people working and living in Russian-speaking environments to choose (how) to comply with the rapid change taking place. In adopting a bilingual mode of instruction, teachers tend to pursue the option of accommodating everyone while nominally respecting the directives of the parliament as every official event is in Ukrainian, thus fostering solidarity with students and other teachers whose first language is often Russian. In complementing the authority’s claim that Ukrainian is the sole language of instruction, Russian continues to be used when citizens want or need it.

This article draws on several research visits to Odessa from 2003 to 2009. Whilst based at the Academy of Theology and Liberal Arts in the old area of Moldavanka, a set of schools was chosen with the help of the rector and some colleagues. The assumption was that in implementing linguistic policies in the city the schools’ compliance with political decisions would be dependent on two variables, one being the economic burden Ukrainian-medium teaching would entail for schools – in this respect I expected schools with higher economic resources to be able to comply more quickly with such regulations. The other variable was the degree of support schools require from the state – here I expected the best schools to be more willing to comply with state regulation.

In exploring the way linguistic and educational policies were received, elite city schools with established reputations and higher incomes were complemented with

others that had limited economic resources available to deal with this rapid change. In Ukraine there are three main kinds of educational establishments: lyceums, gymnasia and other schools. The former two are often more highly esteemed and, in several cases, allow admission to a university without an admission test. Schools can also specialise in a subject (for instance, in French, as is the case in Odessa), thus gain a leading reputation in that field. The selected sample consisted of two educational establishments registered as lyceums, one as a gymnasium, and three as schools.³

As a first step, in discussions with the director and several teachers I attempted to understand their position on their schools' adopted linguistic attitude. This primary stage of information collection was followed by class visits. Most of the conversations with students and teachers were in Russian. Teachers or students rarely spoke Ukrainian informally, whereas during the 'official time' in the classroom, Ukrainian was used more often.

The observer's paradox that can occur in observational fieldwork became particularly evident during a mathematics class visit which, contrary to expectations, was delivered entirely in Russian. At the end of the lesson the teacher informed me (in Russian) that he chose to hold the class in Russian so it would be easier for me to understand. By denying the reality people contribute to modify that very reality, as Herzfeld suggested: 'If we tell you that those things do not exist then, as far as you are concerned, they do not exist' (2005, ix). Was the teacher really trying to make my life easier or was he just trying to deny what had just happened? The ease with which the students were using Russian technical language suggested that most classes are in fact held in Russian. The class ended with the teacher giving the homework assignment in Ukrainian. This was followed by questions from the students, to which he replied in Russian.

The overall research objective then was not simply to 'visit' those schools, but rather to try to 'live' them. I did this by asking questions gradually, watching with the corner of my eye (Craciun 2008) and being receptive to what was being said. On several occasions I was able to speak in a more informal context with people working in the visited schools. Whilst not laying claim to objectivity (from Geertz on, few anthropologists have attempted to do so) these observations shed some light on the contradictory situation prevailing in Odessa concerning language use in schools and other spheres of daily life.

The next section explores the issue of agency in educational policy implementation with specific attention to the Ukrainian context. An introduction to theoretical approaches adopted is followed by an analysis of the fieldwork notes and interviews that show the dynamics in Odessa high schools. The last section presents a discussion of the significance of the observations made in this context.

Agency, education and language in Ukraine

From the first years of Ukrainian independence emphasis was put on national values (Zhulynsky 1997; Masenko and Zaliznyak 2001; Masenko 2004). Newspaper debates were sparkling with views on linguistic choice and its political effects.⁵ As is the case elsewhere, school policies were used as the main instrument for the formation of new generations of attitudes (De Certeau, Julia and Revel 1975; Schnapper 1976, 1991; Gellner 1983; Van Gennep 1995 [1921]; Chanet 1996). In Ukraine particularly, schools are not only regarded as pedagogical institutions but they represent a locus for a series of social and cultural practices that affect society as a whole (Stepanenko 1999, 44).

In assessing the effects of the government strategy, international scholars have considered the process of history writing in Ukraine as strictly connected to the discourse on nation-building and national identity. The extent to which Ukraine proposes a civic discourse on national identity has been widely explored (Takach 1996; Smith et al. 1998; Janmaat 1999, 2000, 2005; Shulman 1999, 2005; Wolczuk 2000; Popson 2001; Kuzio 2002, 2005, 2006; Radchuk 2002; Kulyk 2007), as well as the possible effects on identity of a 'European discourse' in history textbooks (Kohut 1994; Wolczuk 2000; Popson 2001; Snezhkova 2005; Kuzio 2006). A first group of scholars (Wilson 1995, 1997; Takach 1996; Kubaychuk 2004; Kuzio 2005; Marples 2006;) has focused on the official discourse on history and historiography in Ukraine, its evolution after independence, and the rehabilitation of several figures of Ukrainian history. Another group has concentrated on how the official discourse has been codified, standardised and presented through textbooks, especially concerning history (Wolczuk 2000; Popson 2001; Janmaat 2005). There has also been research exploring linguistic interaction (Masenko and Zaliznyak 2001; Taranenko 2001; Fournier 2002; Bilaniuk 2005) and in particular practices through which values are transmitted to the students (Fournier 2007; Pylypenko 2004; Rodgers 2006, 2007; Sovik 2006; Richardson 2008).

Whereas most work has focused on the official discourse, this article concentrates on teaching practices that indirectly help to shape future elites. In this context Richardson (2008) has focused on the local-national dichotomy in Odessa and the importance of agency in this mechanism. Rodgers (2006, 2007) has surveyed the role of teachers in the east of the country as mediators of an official discourse imposed by the government.

Starting from the same point of view of exploring the unofficial realm and informality in the nation-building process, this research wants to integrate the above-mentioned theoretical principles. While much attention has been devoted to official mechanisms through which history is contested and identity renegotiated at a local level, this paper concentrates on the unofficial side of transmission of state instruction and on unspoken rules of transmission of a national identity. *Verba volant, scripta manent* [(spoken) words fly (away), (written) words remain]: whilst on paper everything appears to conform with the state's demands with documents and curricula being in Ukrainian, when it comes to oral communication, much of the central influence is lost in being delegated to state agents and students, teachers, and other community members who become primary actors in the shaping of a Ukrainian identity.

In line with the approach suggested by Herzfeld (2005), the focus here is less on 'what is said' but more on 'how it is said', i.e. the means used in interactions between teachers and students. In this context the gap will be explored between official policy and practice, which may be perceived as inconsistent behaviour. What is the significance of using Russian as a means of teaching in a Ukrainian school where the state has set Ukrainian as the language of instruction? How will students perceive the contradiction when a teacher in charge of delivering a course on the history and culture of Odessa (traditionally a Russian-speaking city) uses Ukrainian, following government regulations?

The specificity of the centre-periphery relationship is a known aspect of politics, particularly when dealing with linguistic practices (Laitin 1998). Analysis of the official discourse often fails to grasp the complexity of communication in messages from the centre to other actors (Herzfeld 2005) and largely ignores the importance of agency. Whereas politicians are the ones who are supposed to decide for the people,

local actors will have to implement those instructions. Is it legitimate to expect that some parts of the message get lost during the process of delivery (Morrison 2008)? Once social actors receive these instructions their 'way of having agency' becomes pertinent. According to Ortner's (1996, 1999, 2006) practice theory, culture (in a very broad sense) constructs people as particular kinds of social actors. In living out their variable practices, these actors either reproduce or transform the culture that made them (Ortner 2006, 129). The opposition between structure and agency then becomes an opposition between central and local actors, who are more or less aware of the inherent necessities of their environment. However, as pointed out by Herzfeld (2005, ix), both the central and peripheral levels as well as all the other strata that compose society need to be considered in order to gain an exhaustive picture of the cultural context and understand the desire of control over the externalities of a national culture.

Agents are part of a process that Giddens (1979) calls 'structuration', meaning the making and remaking of a larger social and cultural formation. Their embedding may take two forms: on the one hand the agent is always enmeshed in relations of solidarity (family, friends, kin and spouse). On the other, s/he also partakes in relationships of power, inequality and competition (Giddens 1979, 134). Some scholars agree that the concept of agency is logically also tied to that of power where the latter is understood as transformative capacity (Giddens 1979, 88; Sewell 1992). But the transformative capacity of agents is only one dimension of how power operates in social systems because those subordinate to the agents still have both powers and projects of their own.

In the case of Odessa, there is some resistance that exists at a small and possibly insignificant level but it is relevant and consistent. Whilst agents are only partially complying with the directions from the capital Kiev, the sum of those attitudes transforms the official discourse into something that reminds us of what Scott (1985) has defined as an unorganised struggle. Others, previously seen as excluded from the political arena or from the battle over 'ideological sectors' of a society (Gramsci 1971) then begin to have a voice in political processes (Gupta 2005).

In the following sections it will be shown how national measures are applied at a local level in a way that might not always comply with the will of legislators, prompting the observer to enquire about the motivation behind the transformation taking place. There are at least two reasons as to why the state instructions are not taken literally. One is that the teachers tend to adapt to the students' needs and help their learning process by using a language they understand, be this Russian or a mix of Russian and Ukrainian. A second one is that teachers and students are not always consistent with the language(s) they are using when trying to express and understand certain concepts. Valeri Khmelko reported that some respondents of linguistic surveys claimed to speak Ukrainian when they were in fact using *surzhik*⁶ (personal communication; see also Khmelko 2004).

Considering intention and intentionality as central components (Sewell 1992; Ortner 2006), in the distinction between routine practices and agency, the following question needs to be asked: 'How much is the use of Russian or mix of Russian and Ukrainian the result of intentionality and how much is it the way people understand linguistic practices?' (Morrison 2008). As Connor (2004) suggested, people's perceptions of reality are more important than the proposed reality in national constructions. This is reflected in the way individuals think about how linguistic measures should be implemented, regardless of the reality.

By using Russian, Odessa teachers show some pedagogical flexibility and find a way of communicating effectively with the students to 'deliver the message' in a

language they feel more confident with (whilst this is the case in Odessa there are several regions in central and northern Ukraine where Ukrainian is largely preferred). Accordingly, people in Odessa, by partially ‘forgetting’ to use Ukrainian in schools, do not reject the language or the role of the language. They may suggest that, rather than the language defining the nation it is through people’s attitude towards language that the nation is defined (Polese and Wylegala 2008a, 2008b). This makes the use of Ukrainian an important asset to a Ukrainian identity and citizenship according to the constitution.

From language policy to language practice: teaching the children in their native language

This section presents an analysis of impressionistic field notes from class observations in the selected Odessa schools. These notes are then analysed within the framework introduced above.

The teacher enters the classroom and students stand up. S/he then turns and asks for silence, in Russian. Technical information for the students and interaction with the students will happen in Russian too. Then the ‘official time’ begins and the teacher will strive to talk in the *ridna mova* [native language].⁷ In either case, when explaining things or testing the students, s/he will try to stick to and make students use Ukrainian. For example, the teacher may translate into Ukrainian a sentence a student just said in Russian. Students will not necessarily understand new words in Ukrainian during explanations and the teacher might have to translate them into Russian. Sometimes s/he will not find the right word in Ukrainian and supplement it with Russian, while still striving to give (the impression that) the class (is) in Ukrainian. When responding to the teacher’s question, the pupil may react in two different ways. If s/he knows the answer from the book, there is a high chance that this will be in the textbook language (most likely Ukrainian). However, in case the reply is more spontaneous and not based on what the student has just read, it will be in Russian. At that point the teacher might want to remind the pupils that the official language is Ukrainian and translate the answer into Ukrainian for them to hear its formulation in the state language. Some pupils, not interested in the lesson, may be chatting among themselves and the teacher will have to call for attention. In this case the language used is Russian. I have observed on more than one occasion that when the teacher asks for silence in Ukrainian, this will be in an official and polite manner. When ignored by the student(s), teachers have switched to Russian, using more informal expressions to win the attention of the student (and to secure the silence needed to continue with the lesson). Through Russian, interaction gets on a more personal level. If the students do not respect the teacher as a civil servant, they will as a person. Once the ‘official time’ is over, people can revert to their native language and the teacher will make the final comments in Russian. Homework might be assigned in Ukrainian, with reference to the fact that the textbook is in Ukrainian.

There are numerous non-native Ukrainian-speaking teachers in Odessa. Only once I attended a class taught by someone who spoke Ukrainian as a first and Russian as a second language. Respect (real or apparent) for the national regulations on the use of the language of instruction is striking. As a lyceum teacher commented, ‘students are not native Ukrainian speakers; neither am I but we do our best.’

Although the real situation is apparent, I noticed a tendency to deny the widespread use of Russian in schools. Talking with the vice-director of a gymnasium, I mentioned that the teaching of the subject ‘History of Odessa’ in Ukrainian seemed

paradoxical since the written sources are in Russian. Agreeing at first she stated that in her school (which has been Ukrainian for ten years), the teacher uses the local language (Russian). She then renegotiated her statement, saying that 'it is very likely that the teacher uses Ukrainian, after all'. She added that gradualism and bilingualism was common, given that 'not everybody understands Ukrainian and that its role as the state language has to be respected. Children are more open, but if you use both languages when teaching, it is better.'

In another school, a teacher acknowledged that children confuse Russian and Ukrainian⁸ and that whilst classes are officially meant to be in Ukrainian there are many individuals who now know Ukrainian but read in Russian. Here it was claimed that 90% of the classes were in fact held in Ukrainian, yet most of the information for students was in Russian. The person responsible for the curricula confirmed that the only book available for teaching world history was in Russian, so use of that language during her classes was natural. Teachers of Ukrainian literature were the only Ukrainian native speakers I encountered in the schools and, although children showed a strong tendency to reply in Russian, they used Ukrainian extensively in class.

The impression I gathered confirms a strong gap between not only policy and practice but also spoken and unspoken discourse. I did not find anybody stating that they were opposed to Ukrainian-medium teaching in schools. Informants spelled out quite clearly that Ukrainian was the *derzhavna mova* [state language], the *ridna mova* [native language] of the country, that it should be used and that everybody should know it. In reality, 'should' did not translate into 'must', and many teachers seemed to know that what the government was demanding was not (yet) achievable. As a result, most schools just strive to give the impression that they respect the 'government plan'. Teachers and directors know that a façade of being Ukrainian in linguistic terms is the best they can provide with many being speakers of Russian. In doing so, little pressure is put on students to use Ukrainian increasingly, and they themselves are not made to speak the language more than on official occasions. This is a phenomenon I have witnessed in all the Ukrainian schools I have visited in Odessa.

From the teachers' perspective, two channels of communication seem to exist. On the one hand, when they act as civil servants and represent the state, they tend to use Ukrainian, the language of the state. When talking as private individuals to other people they seem willing to share with the students and other teachers the fact that they all are from the same milieu, culture, city, with the same fate. In this case, there are some educational messages transmitted through attitude rather than words. Children are educated not only through notions but also in terms of which language to choose in a specific context. They learn that the *derzhavna mova* has to be used on formal occasions. I did not get the impression that teachers were convinced that people had to speak Ukrainian informally in Odessa. Ukrainian was conceived as an asset, a symbol of the state that was hosting them. In their view state language requirements did not have to be complied with at all times.

Contradiction was also visible in other contexts: In a *Vospitatelnyi*⁹ [fourth grade] class, younger students seemed more receptive and open to the use of Ukrainian yet they were visibly more confident in Russian. First reciting poems in Ukrainian they then chanted a song about 'mama' in Russian. Reverting again to Ukrainian some of the expressions the teacher used were mixed with Russian elements as she constructed the superlative with '*samyi*' instead of '*nay*', using '*vsegda*' instead of '*zavzhdy*' or '*krasivo*' instead of '*harno*'. In a ninth grade gymnasium history class, the teacher

started in Ukrainian but then said *sliduche zapytannia*.¹⁰ She then asked a student a question in Ukrainian. Requesting extra time the student answered in Russian, as tends to be the case. Often they will initially speak in Ukrainian and move to Russian if they feel insecure in terms of language use. In the subsequent lesson the teacher referred in Ukrainian to Austria-Hungary as *Avstro-Ugorshina*.¹¹ When communicating in class, either formally or informally, the students would use Russian. In a (6th grade) gymnasium geography class, students who were younger showed less reticence about saying things in Ukrainian but still understood Russian much better. The teacher strove to explain things in Ukrainian but often strayed into Russian to make sure they understood. When the discussion became more heated they drifted into Russian. A lyceum teacher stated that when children join them from other schools, the technical terminology has to be explained in two languages since students often do not know it in Ukrainian. The lyceum became a Ukrainian-medium institution five years ago. Yet *de facto*, as elsewhere too, linguistic dualism is preferred.

The renegotiation of government instruction is visible when dealing with language issues in other spheres as well. There seemed to be a strong European orientation among teachers¹² whose discourses suggested that their choices are not only a result of pedagogical wisdom, but also of an ideological confusion generated by this unique situation in which the instructions of the government (to take the European path and develop the Ukrainian language) do not always overlap with their own values and expectations. A lyceum teacher stated (in Russian) that a European orientation was the way forward for Ukraine. A European studies instructor at the French school seemed ideologically committed to ‘Europeanising’ her classes but was strongly in favour of the use of Russian locally. At the same time the Ukrainian dimension is being emphasised. In a French language class at another school, Ukrainian culture and language was emphasised as part of the European dimension of Ukraine. This was also the case in a lyceum, with students learning about English and German legal systems when studying foreign languages.

Interestingly, most of these contradictions were absent in the visited Russian school. Ukrainian language, literature and history are taught in Ukrainian and have textbooks and programmes approved by the Ministry of Education. On entering the school, the first-year pupils are exempted from test obligations as it is assumed that they might not know Ukrainian at all. Then, from the second year on, they are expected to know Ukrainian in the same way as everybody else. In a class on world literature at the Russian school I inquired about the students’ nationality. All of them stated that they were Ukrainian, also claiming to know and be able to read Ukrainian, and to watch TV and go to the theatre as much in Ukrainian as in Russian. Among foreign writers they named Gogol as being Ukrainian. Overall, these children of the Russian school seemed better prepared than those in other schools. This echoes Kravchenko’s (1985) statement that, in the nineteenth century, Ukrainian children who were compelled to study in Russian obtained lower results because they had a poor understanding of the language.

‘We are what we pretend to be’¹³: on identity and mediation

Reflecting on the use of languages in Odessa schools it seems that, while there is no open challenge to the state and its role, some reluctance to absorb the nation-building project as a ‘whole kit’ can be observed. Measures are likely to be negotiated one by one at the local level by agencies and citizens. However, non-compliance with

state-led initiatives is not necessarily correlated with a denial of the Ukrainian national identity.

Officially, national education policy is complied with in schools. I have found nobody who openly opposes measures suggested by Kiev, such as the use of Ukrainian in class or the adoption of specific textbooks and curricula. This is despite the fact that many teachers, directors and administrative staff are not native speakers of Ukrainian who might disagree with the ideological choices made in Kiev, and that they may not feel comfortable with the new language rules applied in social contexts or even with a Ukrainian identity as promoted throughout the country. In Odessa, I have found no formal opposition to linguistic and educational policies concerning the use of Ukrainian as the sole means of education. The support of the state seems guaranteed, its authority respected and compliance with top-down instructions secured.

By officially accepting the discourse on Ukraine, people in Odessa on the one hand declare their loyalty to the Ukrainian state but on the other they proceed to renegotiate on a number of facets of a proposed Ukrainian identity, with which they are not happy. The official version of history will be renegotiated (Rodgers 2007) as is the case elsewhere too, and alternative formulations will be provided. The European orientation of Ukraine will be officially endorsed but it will be impossible to cancel out from the city all the elements of Russian culture and history. Ukrainians will study what happens in the west in terms of political systems and social transformations but they will remain linked to Russian culture and events and will read Pushkin translated into Ukrainian. When looking for classic or modern literature, they will easily find books written in Russian.

The main point to consider here is the role of language in the country as changes are taking place. In several cases in Ukraine, language is associated with a specific national identity or even with a political position. The state has elevated the Ukrainian language, and it functions as a state symbol. In places such as Odessa the citizens will renegotiate this point before accepting it. The official discourse highlights that there is only one state language in Ukraine and that it has to be preserved and developed. It has to be used for all official occasions, from meetings to politics, school classes to courts, radio and television, broadcasting, and in official documents. However, the language of social convenience in Odessa remains Russian, which the majority of Odessans prefer to use on most social occasions. A number of civil servants have acquired Ukrainian terminology for official purposes but this is not (yet) the norm.

The choice of Ukrainian as a sole state language was a political decision that was anchored in the 1996 constitution. It entailed a lack of political will to upgrade Russian to be the state language. Both former president Leonid Kuchma and presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich had hinted several times at state bilingualism but, aware of the sociopolitical risks an official dual-language status could entail, they have never proceeded to take action on this. Once renegotiation poses no threat to the state, to its authority and to the 'natural order of things', the possibility of a dual-language state and its potentially beneficial aspects can become feasible. The observed patterns of the formation and spread of Ukrainian identity in Odessa, which are the result of a top-down force of nation-building policies and the reception of this force at grassroots levels, have so far produced no open challenge to this project (Khmelko 2004).

The Ukrainian language is considered important as a validity scale in establishing national symbols, as is the acceptance of Kiev as the capital. Language functions to give plausibility to one's identity and to be accepted as Ukrainian by others. The

attitude of many Odessans seems to be that they have the (Ukrainian) language and know how to use it when they have to, whilst preferring to speak Russian. In a tacit compromise Odessans do not have to switch to Ukrainian, and with Kiev not enforcing further measures to spread its use, no confrontation is generated between the two cities. In this case, 'failure' to implement nation-building measures, or their flexible implementation, seems more successful than a systematic and complete application at all levels.

Conclusions

School policies in Ukraine after 1989, and in particular after 1991, seem to suggest a high importance of Ukrainian as the language of instruction and of its role in the definition of a national identity. Several laws and the 1996 Constitution have confirmed the preferred status of Ukrainian. The ideological position behind this is that a country must have an official language and that this can also help the consolidation of a national identity. However, practice shows that not all Ukrainians seem to agree with this position or comply with centrally requested language requirements. Whilst the official criteria may need to be satisfied in full, little control is exerted by the authorities. In the case of Odessa in particular, schools that choose to use Ukrainian as the medium of instruction opt for a more relaxed approach and use both Russian and Ukrainian, not only for informal but also for formal communication.

The mechanism of nation-building through schools in Ukraine suggests that the state is only one of the agents of this transformation rather than the main one. The official policy measures applied by local agencies are supposed to transmit the implicit message that people fulfilling those criteria are allowed to consider themselves Ukrainian. But this message gets reinterpreted on its way to the local agencies and in the way citizens, being local agents themselves, deal with what was decided in Kiev.

This allows for a widening of the criteria giving plausibility to a Ukrainian identity. To be accepted as citizen of the Ukrainian state, people have officially to show some loyalty to the values proposed by the state. To see and present themselves as Ukrainian to the others, citizens have to adopt some of the fundamentals of a Ukrainian identity. One holds a Ukrainian passport and does not intend anything against the Ukrainian state. A positive attitude to the Ukrainian language will mostly be appreciated and allows people to feel Ukrainian and the state to think individuals are complying with expectations from above (Polese and Wylegala 2008a, 2008b). Within this framework, citizens are free to construct their Ukrainianness the way they want, which could be termed national standardisation with a human face. Plausibility is given by acceptance, or at least non-rejection, of the role of the Ukrainian state, its symbols, the Ukrainian language and Kiev as the capital. In this way those living within the border of Ukraine form part of the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) as (potential) Ukrainians.

The observations in Odessa have provided some insights into the soft role played by the Ukrainian state in terms of the language to be used in education. The fact that there is no pressure for classes to comply with official instructions allows for the development of a Ukrainian identity in timing and modalities that vary from teacher to teacher, and from one student to another. This generates what could be called 'spontaneous nation building' (Polese 2009a, 2009b) in a flexible framework, where people have the option to choose the degree to which they accept cultural and national references to adopting a national identity.

Notes

1. The Ukrainian term for native language is *ridna mova* (the verb *narodity* means to ‘give birth’). This sounds innate in the individual and gives the impression of an ancestral link between the culture and the land.
2. In Luhansk, 68.8 % consider themselves Russian speakers, in Donetsk 74.9 % (2001 census); in Odessa this figure is 41.9 % but it includes the whole region, where a number of villages are Bulgarian, Moldovan or Gagauz. Those figures are only indicative since the methodology employed largely focused on citizens (see for instance Stebelsky 2005).
3. I either approached them through an acquaintance or, as a last resort, by simply showing up and asking to see the director. Five schools used Ukrainian as a means of teaching. Three out of these five were considered the best schools in the city. One school was selected for having Russian-medium teaching. Odessa hospitality and the fact that few westerners had done such research in the city helped, in that I was always received warmly although often with some degree of surprise.
4. Grigorii Grabovich: ‘nado perestat prepodavat ukrainskuyu literaturu v shkole. Vooobshche!’ [We need to stop teaching Ukrainian literature at schools!]. Yana Dubinskaya, *Zerkalo Nedeli* 33(612) 2.09.2006.
5. Rosiiska mova yak ne dialekt ukrainskoi’ [Russian is not a Ukrainian dialect]. Aleksandr Palii *Ukrainska Pravda* 9.09.2006; ‘Esli zavtra <dvuyazychnie>’. [And if tomorrow were <bilingual>]. Stanislav Shumlyanskii *Ukrainska Pravda* 7.07.2006; ‘Ukraintsy otlichno vladeut russkim jazykom, a posemu ne nuzhdautsya ni v kakom osobom obsluzhivanii na rodnom.... Tak bylo v Rossii vseгда. I budet?’ [Ukrainians speak Russian perfectly and for some reason do not need to use their native language, so was it in Russia and it will be]. *N. Skrypnyk Zerkalo Nedeli* 24(37) 17.07.1996.
6. An inconsistent mix of Russian and Ukrainian words and grammar, see Bilaniuk (2005) or Seriot (2005) for more details.
7. The Ukrainian language is often referred to, in the public discourse, as *ridna mova* [native language] or *derzhavna mova* [state language]. In terms of learning outcomes, use of *ridna mova* does not imply that students are in the first instance expected to deepen their knowledge of the native language, but rather that they will *focus* on their ‘native language’ (which *de facto* it is not for everyone).
8. The two languages, both belonging both to the Eastern Slavic group, are relatively close. Despite this, there are several grammatical rules and words that are specific to Ukrainian, and a Russian speaker will need some time to be able to understand Ukrainian properly.
9. *Vospitanie* means education in terms of behaviour and attitude rather than notions; accordingly a *vospitatelnyi* class is a lesson on how to relate to the family, people and the country in general.
10. There are two words for ‘next’ in Ukrainian, *slidhuchyj* (in Russian *sleduyushchii*) and *nastupnyi* (in Polish *następny*), but the Russian related word was used.
11. The teacher tended to say in two languages all the words she thought students would not understand. While many geographical names in Russian and Ukrainian sound similar, Hungary is *Vengriya* in Russian and *Ugorshchyna* in Ukrainian.
12. ‘European oriented’ subjects were already introduced under former President Kuchma in 2002–2003.
13. I borrowed this expression from Kurt Vonnegut’s *Mother Night* (1961).

Notes on contributor

Abel Polese is a Marie Curie research fellow in human geography at the University of Edinburgh, and prior to that at the Hannah Arendt Institute of Dresden. He was also lecturer at the International Christian University (Kiev and Odessa). His research interests include: informal economies in former socialist countries, nation building and identity policies in Ukraine, civil society and social movements in former Soviet republics. He is currently working (with Donnacha Ó Beacháin) on an edited volume on colour revolutions in post-Soviet spaces (2010, forthcoming, Routledge) and on a research project on the role of informal economies in Turkey and Ukraine.

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