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Pronounce “Palyanitsa” (“паляниця”) as an Identity Marker: Linguistic Lessons of the Russian - Ukrainian War.

By Oksana Bomba, University of South Florida

We often say that language and identity go hand in hand. The war in Ukraine illuminates this idea even more. The war is a tragedy for humankind and is a hard way to learn and become a stronger country. The war in Ukraine brought ideas and discussions about the significance of language into the everyday life of the country.

I grew up in an independent Ukraine, in an atmosphere of love for Ukraine, our language, and our culture. Ukrainian folk songs and poems, written centuries ago, describe the heroic fight of the Ukrainian people for independence and promote freedom as the highest value. The sayings I learned as a child were “Language is the biggest treasure of a nation,” “Language is the soul of the nation,” and “Learn about other cultures but do not forget your own.”

From my parents, I have learned that in Soviet times, Ukrainian artists, singers, and scientists were suppressed and even lost lives because of the KGB repressions. Whole families were sent out by the communist soviet government to distant areas like Siberia. According to the Soviet political agenda, the idea of distinctiveness, uniqueness, the national and cultural identity had to be replaced with the ideology of communism. Such history seemed to me like an illusional past I can read about in books. It seemed like this until February 24, 2022, the date when the whole area of Ukraine has been brutally attacked in the middle of the night in an attempt of invasion.

Nowadays, when the country is at war, thoughts and ideas that circulate in society, especially among Ukrainian citizens at the front lines, are “Language is a weapon,” “Language is the marker,” and “Language is a security border” that helps to survive on the battlefield. One example, related both to war humor but also lessons of war, include the Ukrainian word “palyanitsa” which also became a meme. Many people think that Ukrainian and Russian languages are similar when in fact there are vital differences. Because of the differing phonological constraints between these two languages, trying to pronounce the word “palyanitsa” is challenging for invaders. Asking a person to pronounce this word is a quick check-up needed for security reasons at war, which gives away the enemy or a diversant. This word became rather a symbol of how language matters and, indeed, can be used as a marker of identity. “Palyanitsa,” which in Ukrainian means a specific kind of bread, includes many soft sounds and its sound combinations are challenging to pronounce for invaders. In addition, its meaning is difficult to guess, as it sounds nothing like Russian. In the first days of the war, the propagandists from the Russian state television further confused their viewers, claiming that the mysterious Ukrainian word “palyanitsa” translates into Russian as “strawberry” (in Russian, “klubnika”). Nowadays, one can find many more Ukrainian words, poems, and memes posted on social media that represent linguistic tricks and pronunciation challenges for the enemy.

On a more serious note, the question of language has been manipulated and used as a motive for the Russian invasion. This way, language becomes one of the key factors that come into play in the fight for independence, when it is a matter of Ukraine’s survival. Many citizens speak Russian as their first language, due to historical and geographical factors. Ironically, war became a trigger, motivating many citizens to learn the Ukrainian language and practice it with children.

Nowadays many people living in Ukraine are re-considering the importance of language, and if it is simply a matter of personal convenience or a marker of identity and a certain position in wartime. What lessons does the war give to Ukraine and the world? One can hardly predict what the linguistic landscape will look like for the next generations of Ukrainians. We hope to protect Ukrainian identity, culture, and the right to freedom.