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Speaking, Being and Resisting

Linguistic Decolonization and Identity Negotiation among
Ukrainians with Russian as Their First Language

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Ukrainians with Russian as their first language negotiate linguistic identity in relation to national and ethnic identity during Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. Drawing on postcolonial approaches to language, linguistic imperialism, standard language ideology and hybridity, it asks how participants relate to Russian and Ukrainian, how they reflect on linguistic norms, and to what extent linguistic subversion is a useful lens for understanding decolonial language practices. The study is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with seven Ukrainians currently living in Sweden. The findings show that participants consistently separate Russian language use from Russian national belonging, while reallocating Russian and Ukrainian to different social domains. Russian is primarily associated with intimacy, family, memory and embodied selfhood, whereas Ukrainian is linked to public legitimacy, collective identity and national belonging. Participants generally reproduce elements of standard language ideology, although attitudes towards surzhyk have become more accepting. Linguistic subversion offers only limited explanatory value: decolonization appears more clearly through language shift, changing linguistic functions and the weakening of Russian metropolitan authority than through deliberate transformation of Russian from within.

Key words: linguistic decolonization, Ukraine, Russian language, postcolonialism, standard language ideology

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1. Introduction

In the spring of 2022, I volunteered as a Swedish teacher for newly arrived refugees from Ukraine. Over time, one of the participants and I became close friends, and we continued meeting long after the study circle had ended. As our conversations gradually shifted from grammar and literature to broader questions of language and culture, I eventually asked what I had hesitated to ask: *What is your mother tongue?*

"Oh, it's Russian," she replied with a knowing shrug.

My hesitation to ask a Ukrainian woman in what language she thinks, swears and dreams, at that particular moment in history, and her equally unhesitating answer, became one of the starting points for this thesis. At a time when Russian missiles were destroying Ukrainian cities, her mother tongue remained Russian. That apparent contradiction raises broader questions about language, identity and belonging in contemporary Ukraine. Few places illustrate the notion of language as a battlefield, in its most literal sense, as clearly as Ukraine after 2022.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, newly independent Ukraine became home to a large population of individuals with Russian as their first, or native, language. For many of them, Russian was not a marker of Russian national identity or political loyalty, but simply the language of childhood, family and everyday life (Bilaniuk 2005, 2, 8; Kulyk 2019). At the same time, however, official Russian discourse has consistently presented the Russian language as carrying a transnational Russian identity and civilizational mission extending beyond the borders of the Russian state (Noack 2021, 1–3). Language, in this understanding, is not merely a means of communication but a marker of political and cultural belonging.

The relationship between language and empire has been thoroughly examined, including through the concept of linguistic imperialism. While the field has largely focused on the global role of English, the imperial dimensions of Russian have received comparatively little attention outside scholarship concerned specifically with Eastern Europe. Robert Phillipson, whose work helped establish linguistic imperialism as a field of inquiry,

dismissed the idea that Russian could be understood as an imperial language in *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992, 307), only expanding the term to encompass Soviet language policies decades later (Phillipson 2018).¹ The relative absence of Russian from broader sociolinguistic discussions appears increasingly striking in light of contemporary Russian political discourse.

A central idea in Russian official discourse on the imagined relationship between Russian speakers worldwide is the ideological concept of *russkii mir*, which, as Noack (2021) argues, invests the Russian language with considerable symbolic and cultural power. Within this worldview, Russian is not a politically neutral language detached from questions of identity, but a carrier of a shared Russian civilization extending beyond the borders of the Russian Federation (Putin 2023; Noack 2021). Moreover, Russia's use of the Russian language as an instrument of soft power through institutions such as the Russkii Mir Foundation and Rossotrudnichestvo has increasingly intersected with hard power and the weaponization of language (Russkii Mir Foundation n.d.; Biedarieva 2024; Noack 2021). This has been especially visible during Russia's war on Ukraine, starting in 2014, where linguistic arguments have been used to legitimize territorial ambitions and military aggression (Putin 2014; Putin 2022; Biedarieva 2024, 139). Russian claims to a responsibility to protect Russian speaking "compatriots" beyond its borders have consequently given questions of language an explicit security dimension. The language ideologies promoted in Russian official discourse are thus a matter of security in Ukraine and the wider European context.

In light of this, understanding processes of linguistic decolonization in Russian-speaking contexts is of considerable importance. Processes through which the Russian language is increasingly detached from its presumed "center", discussed in sociolinguistic scholarship in terms of pluricentricity, have received growing scholarly attention (see, for example, Mustajoki et al. 2019). This brings about the question of to what extent a language so firmly claimed by its center, to the point where it is invoked as an instrument in military aggression, can be decentralized, and what such decentralization might entail.

¹ The 2018 version of Phillipson's encyclopedia entry explicitly discusses Soviet language policy as an example of linguistic imperialism, citing Rannut's (1994) interpretation. This discussion is absent from the revised 2024/2026 version.

In the context of Ukraine, linguistic decolonization has to a large extent been associated with derussification and the strengthening of Ukrainian in both public and private domains. Yet this process also raises more complicated questions for Ukrainians for whom Russian is a first language. Reflecting on this tension, Ukrainian scholar Darya Tsymbalyuk asks: *"What is a mother tongue, if your mother declares it dead?"* (Tsymbalyuk 2023, 702). Since independence in 1991, the position of Ukrainian has been subject to repeated political and ideological struggles, with efforts towards derussification gaining particular urgency following the Revolution of Dignity and Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, and even more so following the full-scale invasion in 2022. Yet many Ukrainians continue to speak Russian in their everyday lives (Kulyk 2024). Some do not feel sufficiently proficient in Ukrainian to make a complete transition (Kudriavtseva 2025), while others simply do not wish to abandon the language they grew up with (Tsymbalyuk 2023).

The decolonization of Russian "from within" has received less scholarly attention in the Ukrainian context. Averbuch (2023) and Vozna (2021), among others, have explored questions of deterritorialization, self-decolonization and the construction of boundaries from Russia, particularly in relation to Russophone cultural production and identity, but the question remains comparatively underexplored in relation to speakers' everyday linguistic practices. By shifting the focus from literary and cultural production to speakers' accounts of their everyday linguistic practices, this thesis examines how linguistic identity is negotiated in relation to ethnic and national identity among Ukrainians with Russian as their first language in the context of the ongoing war, and to what extent strategies of linguistic decolonization identified in other postcolonial contexts can also be identified here. Drawing on postcolonial approaches to imperial language, including Ashcroft et al.'s work on linguistic appropriation and Homi K. Bhabha's theorization of hybridity, as well as the broader scholarly discussion of postcolonial approaches to the post-Soviet space, I examine these questions through qualitative interviews with seven participants. To examine this, I formulate the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Ukrainians with Russian as their first language negotiate their linguistic identity in relation to their ethnic and national identity?

RQ2: How do the participants reflect on their language practices in relation to standard language ideologies?

Building on the answers to these questions, I further ask:

RQ3: To what extent is the concept of linguistic subversion a useful analytical lens for understanding decolonial language practices among Ukrainians with Russian as their first language?

2. Theory and background

The following chapter covers the background against which this thesis formulates its research problem and maps out the theoretical framework used for analysis. Section 2.1 introduces linguistic pluricentricity and linguistic imperialism as concepts, discusses the language ideologies prevalent in Russia's self-ascribed role as metropolis for the Russophone communities of the world and gives an overview of sociolinguistics in Ukraine and the role of the Russian language in that context. In section 2.2, postcolonial theory and its relevance for analyzing post-Soviet spaces is outlined. Within a postcolonial framework, the section further discusses postcolonial perspectives on language and linguistic decolonization. In both sections 2.1 and 2.2, previous research on the topic and relevant literature are reviewed and discussed.

2.1. Language, power and identity

2.1.1. A brief note on language ideologies, pluricentricity and linguistic imperialism

The term language ideology refers to sets of ideas and beliefs about the nature of language and its role in social life. A core assumption of language ideology research is that language is not merely a system of communication, but that language practices are socially, culturally and politically situated. Understandings of what a language is and what a language does are therefore ideologically constructed, and these understandings shape a wide range of practices, from how individuals speak to how states formulate language policies (Woolard 1998, 3–27).

Of particular relevance to this thesis is the concept of standard language ideology. The idea of a standard, codified variety of a language, assumed to constitute the correct form of that language and has been closely associated with European nation-building (Woolard 1998; Milroy 2001). Standard language ideology is concerned not only with establishing a codified variety, but also with positioning other varieties as, to varying degrees, incorrect or inferior. Closely associated with standard language ideology is the concept of linguistic purism, which promotes the notion that a language can be contaminated by foreign influence, deviations from standard norms, or "sloppy" language use, but can likewise be purified of such elements (Thomas 1991, 12).

The term pluricentricity describes a condition in which a language is dispersed across such broad geographical and social spaces that multiple norm-providing centers emerge, giving rise to distinct standard varieties (Clyne 1992, 1). English is perhaps the most salient example of a pluricentric language. In many ways, pluricentricity challenges standard language ideology and linguistic purism, since the more diverse and differentiated a language becomes, the more difficult it is to maintain a single normative center. Pluricentricity does not, however, necessarily dissolve linguistic hierarchies. In his seminal work *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992), Robert Phillipson argues that the global spread of a language may, despite its pluricentric development, continue to reproduce colonial relations of power. Depending on the domains in which "world languages" are used, the relationship between the former imperial language and local languages may still bear the characteristics of a colonizer–colonized relationship.

2.1.2. Russian outside Russia: imperial history and contemporary "hard power"

The dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in, among other things, large Russian-speaking² populations ending up on the other side of the newly drawn borders of the Russian Federation, thus detached from the language's titular nation. Their presence was the result of a myriad of causes spanning centuries: Russian imperial expansion, the language policies of the empire, Soviet resettlement policies, migration, and heritage; and their future in the nation-building processes that followed the Soviet disintegration would become highly contested. What has characterized the language conflicts of the post-Soviet states, particularly Ukraine and the Baltic states, since 1991 is the imperial legacy of the Russian language's presence (Vamling et al. 2025; Hogan-Brun et al. 2008). The spread of Russian was actively promoted through top-down Russification policies that sought to uphold Moscow-based political and cultural hegemony in both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (Danylenko and Naienko 2019; Rannut 2020; Vamling et al. 2025).³

² The category "Russian speaker" is not unproblematic. It may refer to someone who has Russian as a first language, someone who acquired it through education and uses it regularly, or someone who speaks it only occasionally alongside other languages. The term therefore risks suggesting a more clearly bounded linguistic group than actually exists. In this thesis, "Russian speaking" is used pragmatically where broader speaker communities are discussed, while the participant group is defined more narrowly as Ukrainians with Russian as their first language.

One of Phillipson's main criteria for linguistic imperialism is the imperial language's hegemony over information and communication and the asymmetrical relationship between the imperial language and local languages (Phillipson 1992, 2009). Since 1991, this asymmetry has increasingly been challenged through restorative language legislation and the gradual derussification of public institutions, education and public space in several post-Soviet states (Grenoble 2003, 204–208; Pavlenko 2008, 283–285). The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the weakening of the metropolis' authority over language norms nevertheless created conditions favorable to the emergence of national varieties of Russian, and this possibility has received increasing scholarly attention. Researchers studying Russian in the post-Soviet states as well as among Russophone communities in Russia's "far abroad" have documented differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and discourse practices that point towards an ongoing pluralization of Russian (Mustajoki et al. 2019, 3–10; Ryazanova-Clarke 2014; Protassova and Yelenevskaya 2021; Shaibakova et al. 2023). Yet, pluricentricity is as much a political phenomenon as it is a linguistic one and adopting a purely descriptive position risks obscuring the power relations that both precede and shape processes of linguistic decentralization.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the prospects of possible pluricentricity, the language ideologies of both the metropolis and Russian-speaking communities outside it need to be taken into account. A concept integral to contemporary Russian official language ideology is "russkii mir", or the "Russian world": the notion that Russian speakers around the world are bound together through a shared historical, cultural and spiritual community (Noack 2021, 1–16; Kamusella 2018, 159; Suslov 2018). The idea goes beyond imagining Russian as a lingua franca in contact situations between communities in the post-Soviet space and their diaspora. Instead, russkii mir mythologizes history, language and culture to construct an imagined transnational community in which Russian speakers remain spiritually and culturally connected to the metropolis.

Kamusella argues that through the ideology of russkii mir, together with institutional factors such as the Moscow-based Russian Academy of Sciences remaining the sole authority responsible for codifying the norms of Russian, the language is constructed as a

³ For more comprehensive historical accounts of Russian and Soviet language policy and Russification, see

monocentric national language with extranational ambitions (Kamusella 2018, 167). Russian is thus expected to be used beyond the borders of the Russian Federation while remaining normatively controlled from within it, making it, in Kamusella's words, the "sole exception" (2018, 154) to the principles of pluricentricity among the so called "world languages". Similarly, Ivanova-Sullivan describes a "strong normative bias against recognition of distinct national varieties of Russian beyond Russia's borders" (2019, 224) and a "traditional ideologically colored perception of the Russian spoken in the metropole as the 'correct' norm and acquisition goal in the Russian diaspora" (2019, 224). In other words, both the language ideology of the metropolis and, to some extent, that of Russian-speaking communities themselves continue to construe Russian as fundamentally monocentric.

Mustajoki argues that there is a growing linguistic autonomy among Russian speakers outside of Russia, an increasing detachment from metropolitan norms that he describes as a democratization of Russian (2019, 29). This "democratization" has not been met by an official recognition of pluricentricity, but by renewed attempts from the Russian state to maintain its normative and symbolic authority over the language. Noack (2021), Wawrzonek (2021), Kamusella (2018) and Mustajoki, Yelenevskaya and Protassova (2019) all describe Russian language as an important instrument of Russian soft power through organizations such as the Russkii Mir Foundation and Rossotrudnichestvo, whose purpose is to promote positive images of Russia through language and culture.

However, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, language has increasingly become intertwined with more coercive forms of power. Claims of protecting Russian-speaking communities have repeatedly been invoked by the Russian state as part of its justification for military intervention in Ukraine (Putin 2014, 2022; Casula 2025; Biedarieva 2024, 139). Thus, while speaker communities outside the Russian Federation appear to be moving towards greater linguistic independence from the metropolis, the Russian state has responded by reaffirming its claim to remain the normative center of the Russian language. In this respect, Russian presents an almost inverse case to English. Whereas English continues to function as a globally hegemonic language despite the absence of institutional

claims to a single metropolitan norm, Russian appears to be losing its linguistic hegemony among many of its former imperial subjects while the metropolis simultaneously insists on preserving its normative centrality.

2.1.3. Russian in Ukraine

From the time of independence in 1991, language has been at the forefront of discussions surrounding Ukrainian nation-building and identity negotiation. Explaining the linguistic features of the relationship between the Russo-Soviet imperial legacy and Ukrainian self-determination, between macro-level policymaking and micro-level linguistic practices, is by no means a straightforward task. Significant scholarly contributions have been made to the subject, among which the extensive work of Volodymyr Kulyk (2007, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2024) has informed a large part of the background foundation for this thesis. To provide a brief background, much of Ukraine has long been characterized by varying degrees of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism, shaped by successive periods of Russian imperial and Soviet rule. Dominant European notions of one language–one nation have contributed to common misconceptions of a linguistically ”divided” Ukraine (Kulyk 2014). Within both Ukrainian nationalist and Soviet language ideologies, the ”mother tongue” or ”native language” was treated as an expected attribute of national belonging (Kulyk 2013, 15–17), an assumption that has also influenced broader discourses portraying Ukraine as divided into a ”Russian-speaking” east and south and a ”Ukrainian-speaking” west. Kulyk, however, scrutinizes the reliance on census data and sweeping generalizations, demonstrating that the actual linguistic situation is considerably more complex, with everyday language practices diverging from such categorizations. Rather than reflecting stable and clearly bounded groups, the Ukrainian context reveals what may be described as a structural mismatch between language use and ethnolinguistic identity, in which individuals may speak one language while identifying with another (Kulyk 2007, 2013, 2017).

The distinction between ethnic and national identity is also historically significant in the Ukrainian context. Under Soviet nationality policy, Ukrainian nationality was primarily understood as an ethnocultural category, whereas after independence Ukrainian national identity increasingly came to be articulated in civic and territorial terms as well. This development became particularly pronounced after 2014, when identification with the

Ukrainian nation increasingly cut across linguistic and ethnocultural divisions (Kulyk 2016). While Kulyk primarily demonstrates the mismatch between language use and ethnolinguistic identity, Laada Bilaniuk's comprehensive study of linguistic identities in Ukraine, *Contested Tongues: Language Politics and Cultural Correction in Ukraine*, broadens the perspective by examining linguistic practices themselves. Rather than clearly bounded speaker communities, Ukraine's sociolinguistic landscape is constituted by mixed repertoires, code-switching and fluid language practices. Neither Kulyk nor Bilaniuk deny regional variation in language use, but both reveal several complementary layers of complexity. Bilaniuk argues that not only is it possible to identify with a Ukrainian national, ethnic or cultural identity while simultaneously using Russian as one's everyday language, but that even micro-level language practices are characterized by hybridity, in that mixing and variation constitute the norm rather than the exception (Bilaniuk 2005, 2, 8). An illustration of this everyday multilingual reality can be found in Ukrainian American author Victoria Belim's autobiographical novel *The Rooster House*, in which she reflects on the linguistic landscape of her childhood summers in Poltava as a continuous oscillation between linguistic codes: "'Grandmother, why did you marry Grandpa?' I addressed Asya in Russian, while she replied in Ukrainian, a typical pattern in mixed Soviet families like ours" (Belim 2023, 41). Although literary rather than empirical, Belim's account illustrates the fluid language practices and seamless transitions between linguistic codes described by Bilaniuk.

When describing such a linguistic landscape, the categories we use and what we assign to them cannot be taken for granted but must themselves be interrogated. Whether we choose to call it "mother tongue", "first language", or, in diaspora contexts, "heritage language", reflecting on the usefulness of such categories becomes necessary. At the very core of the term "mother tongue", or "native language" for that matter, lies something that goes beyond mere means of communication. The terms connote heritage, home, and a kind of ethnolinguistic essence. Seals (2019) discusses the relationship between Ukrainian sociolinguistic discourses and the terms "mother tongue" and "first language", noting that a discrepancy can be discerned already in the translation of the term itself. "Mother tongue" in Ukrainian is *pidna mova* (*ridna mova*, family language)⁴, but *ridna mova* carries

⁴ The Ukrainian word *pid* (*rid*) translates to family, kin or tribe.

several meanings depending on context, referring both to the language connected to national identity and origin and to the language one grew up speaking, that is, one's first language (Seals 2019, 97). It is thus possible to identify Ukrainian as one's mother tongue based on an ethnic, national or hereditary connection to the language, while using Russian as the primary language of communication in everyday life.

So, who, then, is a Russian speaker and who is a Ukrainian speaker? Kulyk addresses this issue, noting that "what seems unambiguous in survey data, using one of the more or less arbitrary criteria of defining 'Russian speakers', turns out to be messy in real life where both language practice and ethnolinguistic identity are anything but clear-cut." (Kulyk 2019, 174). He describes this discrepancy as a divergence between language practices and ethnocultural identity (Kulyk 2016, 2019). For instance, it was not uncommon for individuals who used Russian as their primary language in everyday life to simultaneously identify with the Ukrainian nation and regard Ukrainian as the native language of that nation (Kulyk 2014). Rather than "choosing" one language as one's own, the two languages were often allocated to different domains. Regardless of which language was most commonly used in public or private life, something that varied considerably between regions, Ukrainian retained a high symbolic value (Kulyk 2013, 2014). This created a situation where it was entirely possible to regard Ukrainian as one's mother tongue, perhaps even use it within the family, while preferring Russian for communication at work, with friends or classmates, or for consuming media and entertainment, all while recognizing Ukrainian as the all-encompassing state language. This distribution can be conceptualized as a kind of macro-Ukrainian, meso-Russian and micro-Ukrainian "language cake".

Recognizing the fluidity of language use does not, however, mean that language choices occur under neutral conditions. Even though language use and identity do not necessarily align in a straightforward manner but are continuously negotiated, it is important to acknowledge that, due to the asymmetrical relations characterizing Ukrainian bilingualism, bilingual practices cannot be interpreted as neutral, with both languages occupying equal positions in terms of social legitimacy. One of the principal effects of Russification was precisely the establishment of this asymmetrical relationship between Russian and Ukrainian. Russian came to function as the language of urban life, administration and other prestigious domains, while Ukrainian was largely associated with rural areas and domestic

contexts (Bilaniuk 2005). Imperial and later Soviet language policies further reinforced this hierarchy by positioning Russian as the language of cultivation, education and social mobility. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire also sought to curb the development of Ukrainian through measures such as restrictions on Ukrainian-language publishing, reflecting the close connection between language and emerging Ukrainian nationalism (Magocsi 2010, 393–397; Danylenko and Naienko 2019, 23, 31–37). Ukrainian consequently assumed a central symbolic role in early movements for national self-determination.

An inherent feature of linguistic imperialism is precisely the condition in which linguistic choices are shaped by unequal sociopolitical realities. If one language grants access to prestigious domains while another does not, language choice will inevitably be affected by these conditions. Likewise, in a society recovering from imperialism, preferring the local language over the imperial language may itself carry political meaning. Actual linguistic practices must therefore always be situated within their historical, political and cultural context (Bilaniuk 2005, 9, 22). These unequal linguistic hierarchies have also shaped attitudes towards mixed language varieties such as *surzhyk*. An important feature of Ukrainian sociolinguistics, *surzhyk* is a pejorative umbrella term for different varieties of mixed language (Bilaniuk 2004; Bernsand 2007). While several varieties exist (see Bilaniuk 2004 for an attempted typology), the term has historically referred to the practice of speaking Ukrainian with a heavy influence of Russian lexical features. Discourses surrounding *surzhyk* have commonly ranged from portraying it as a "disease" (Bilaniuk 2005, 9), a "degradation of Ukrainian language and culture" (Bilaniuk 2005, 20), to simply "degenerate and immoral" (Bernsand 2007, 206). As is often the case with contact languages in purist language ideologies, *surzhyk* has been regarded as a deviation from the standard language and therefore as linguistically "wrong".

What is significant in the Ukrainian case, however, is that this discursive pattern adds another layer to the standard language–mixed language conflict. Russian constituted the historical standard of the metropolis, the imperial language. Yet the stigma surrounding *surzhyk* was primarily concerned with its perceived corruption or degradation of Ukrainian, rather than with its deviation from standard Russian. *Surzhyk* has generally been understood as the product of Ukrainian-speaking rural populations' attempts to speak Russian, that is, as a movement away from Ukrainian rather than away from Russian

(Bernsand 2007). The linguistic "transgression", so to speak, has therefore historically been understood as committed against Ukrainian rather than against Russian.

This understanding has, however, increasingly been challenged. Bernsand describes the Ukrainophone ideological camp as further split into anti- and pro-surzhyk currents, where "the defenders of surzhyk do not (...) deconstruct the notion of a crucial bond between language and national identity; they rather reformulate it by deemphasizing purism and broadening the horizon of legitimate Ukrainian varieties" (Bernsand 2007, 197). Rather than rejecting the relationship between language and Ukrainian identity, this perspective expands the boundaries of what is considered legitimate Ukrainian. More recent scholarship likewise suggests that attitudes towards surzhyk have continued to change following Russia's full-scale invasion, increasingly framing it as a transitional variety from Russian to Ukrainian rather than the reverse.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine constituted the most radical change to Ukraine's sociolinguistic environment since independence. During the little more than two decades between 1991 and 2014, macro-level language policies shifted back and forth between strengthened Ukrainization and more softening policies on use of Russian. Following the Revolution of Dignity, however, derussification accelerated in public institutions and education, while the position of Ukrainian as the state language was further strengthened (Kulyk 2016). Yet, as Kulyk notes, "this symbolic appreciation was not accompanied by any large-scale transition to the use of Ukrainian in everyday life" (2016, 103). This changed in 2022. Since the full-scale invasion, increasing numbers of Ukrainians have reported deliberately switching to Ukrainian, identifying the war, rather than state language policy, as the principal reason for doing so (Kulyk 2024). Recent studies suggest that the war has likewise accelerated changing attitudes towards surzhyk, which is increasingly viewed as a transitional form from Russian to Ukrainian rather than the reverse (Kuznietsova 2026). The changing social meaning of surzhyk also raises the question of whether mixed language varieties may function as decolonial linguistic practices, an issue returned to in the analysis.

Russian has thus occupied different positions within Ukrainian society across different historical periods, but these positions have never been static nor uniformly distributed. As this section has sought to demonstrate, the sociolinguistic landscape has shifted from a

Soviet configuration in which Russian largely occupied both macro- and meso-level domains while Ukrainian was primarily associated with the micro-level of home and family life, to a post-independence situation where Ukrainian assumed the macro-level role as the state language while Russian retained much of its meso-level position in urban communication, media and entertainment. Since 2022, Ukrainian has increasingly expanded into these meso-level domains as well. At the same time, individual linguistic biographies have remained considerably more complex than such broad historical developments alone might suggest.

2.2. Thinking postcolonially

2.2.1. Why postcolonialism?

In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars of the former Eastern Bloc increasingly turned to colonial and postcolonial perspectives to understand the nation-building processes that emerged in the region. East-Central Europe's particular "in-betweenness", shaped by the legacies of the Russian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and German empires, brought about renewed discussions of imperialism and its cultural aftermath. Due to the aim and scope of this thesis, the present section focuses specifically on possible postcolonial dimensions of Russian hegemony in Ukraine. For broader discussions of postcolonial perspectives on East-Central Europe and Central Asia, see, for example, Kołodziejczyk and Huigen (2023), Kocherzhat (2024), and Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012).

Within studies of the former Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, this development has been described as an "imperial turn", through which Russia increasingly came to be analyzed alongside other European empires (Chernetsky 2003; von Hagen 2014; Moore 2001; Puleri 2020). David Chioni Moore is generally credited with extending postcolonial analysis beyond literary studies to the broader political and social transformations of the post-Soviet space, arguing that despite important differences from overseas colonialism, Russo-Soviet imperialism shares sufficient structural features with other empires for postcolonial theory to offer valuable analytical insights. Similar arguments had already been advanced within Ukrainian literary studies by Pavlyshyn (1993) and Shkandrij (2001), who examined how Russian imperial discourse constructed Ukraine through colonial imaginaries and how these were challenged in Ukrainian cultural production.

Whether post-Soviet societies should be understood as postcolonial nevertheless remains contested. Two objections have been particularly influential. The first questions whether the territorially contiguous expansion of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union can be regarded as colonialism in the same sense as overseas European empires. The second emphasizes Russia's own ambiguous position in relation to Western Europe, giving rise to concepts such as "self-colonization" (Chernetsky 2003, 36–37). Neither objection necessarily undermines a postcolonial reading of Ukraine. As Moore argues, colonialism has taken multiple historical forms, while Russia's peripheral relationship to Western Europe does not negate its simultaneous role as an imperial center vis-à-vis its own subject peoples. Spivak further observes that when one state imposes its laws, educational system and economic interests upon another, the terms *colonizer* and *colonized* remain analytically meaningful (Spivak 2006, 828).

This study adopts this perspective. It is not primarily concerned with classifying Russo-Soviet rule within a particular model of colonialism, but with examining how its cultural and linguistic legacies continue to shape identity, belonging and language practices. The applicability of postcolonial theory is therefore explored through how people interpret their own lived experiences rather than through questions of economic history or international law.

A concept that offers a useful framework for understanding how colonial legacies shape the negotiation and performance of identity is hybridity, most influentially theorized within postcolonial studies by Homi K. Bhabha. For Bhabha, hybridity emerges under conditions of liminality: the "in-between" space in which colonizing and colonized cultures encounter, interpret and transform one another. He illustrates this space through the metaphor of a stairwell whose movement "prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities" (Bhabha 2004, 5). Hybridity should therefore be understood as a process through which identities and cultural meanings are negotiated within unequal relations of power, rather than as a simple mixture of two otherwise coherent cultures. Colonial authority is consequently never complete or uncontested. Colonized subjects retain agency and may appropriate elements of the colonizer's culture in ways that unsettle its claim to cultural authority (Huddart 2006). Puleri, for example, interprets post-Maidan Russophone Ukrainian identity as "going beyond the coordinates

predetermined by Moscow” (Puleri 2020, 164), illustrating how cultural resources associated with the former imperial metropolis may be reworked outside its political and symbolic control.

Bhabha's "Third Space" consequently disrupts a straightforward opposition between colonial domination and anti-colonial resistance. Anti-colonial nationalism is often a necessary stage in struggles against imperial rule, affirming the historical distinctiveness, cultural autonomy and political agency of the colonized nation. In the Ukrainian context, Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk (2019, 702) describe this as a potentially necessary transitional phase in the decolonization process, through which the former imperial culture is rejected and national identity reasserted. At the same time, drawing on Bhabha, they suggest that this phase may eventually give way to forms of identification that move beyond rigid colonial binaries and allow greater space for hybridity and cultural diversity.

The Ukrainian case nevertheless differs from many postcolonial contexts in one important respect. Whereas colonial ideologies often relied on constructing clear distinctions between colonizer and colonized, Russo-Soviet imperialism was characterized by extensive assimilation. Ukrainians were, and to some extent still are, expected to internalize identities such as "Little Russians" or the "brotherly nation". The possibilities for appropriating the colonizer's culture as an act of disobedience are therefore more limited, while hybrid identities may themselves be perceived as threatening the distinctiveness upon which Ukrainian self-determination relies. Hybridity is consequently not an uncontroversial concept in discussions of Ukrainian decolonization.

Puleri addresses this tension through his analysis of Russophone Ukrainian literature. He argues that the need to reject cultural and linguistic imperialism, together with externally imposed identities, has frequently rendered hybridity a "missing" position within the Ukrainian cultural field (Puleri 2020, 45–47). His analysis challenges the assumed correspondence between nation, territory, language, identity and culture: the use of Russian does not in itself determine Russian national or political identification. At the same time, Puleri distinguishes between "forced or imposed" and "freely assumed" hybridity (2020, 54). This distinction is important, as it prevents hybridity from being understood either as an uncomplicated celebration of cultural mixture or simply as a residue of imperial

assimilation. A hybrid cultural position may emerge from unequal imperial relations while also being consciously appropriated and redefined by those who inhabit it.

2.2.2. Decolonizing language: renegotiation of norms, subversion and linguistic function

Language is deeply intertwined with colonialism and imperial ambitions. At the core of linguistic imperialism, that is, the subjugation of colonial subjects through language, lies the notion that the language of the imperial center is inherently superior to the languages of the colonized (Phillipson 1992, 2009). This has both ideological and structural implications. Beliefs about the superiority of the imperial language may be used to rationalize the suppression of the linguistic rights of the colonized, while access to the imperial language may grant access to education, social mobility, and economic resources. Linguistic issues have therefore often been central to decolonization processes, for example through the restoration and rehabilitation of local languages. Rejecting the imperial language has been an important part of decolonization, but in many postcolonial societies the imperial language has remained in use, partly because of its practical function as a lingua franca in linguistically diverse areas, and partly because local languages have been marginalized, weakened, or lost. Postcolonial theory has therefore also addressed processes of decolonization that take place within the imperial language itself. This is particularly visible in contexts where colonized populations no longer have access to precolonial heritage languages, as in parts of the Americas after the transatlantic slave trade. Such decolonizing strategies may include defying the standard norms of the hegemonic language, using the language to “speak back” to the center, and reshaping it to signify local cultural experience.

One of the most seminal works dealing with the decolonization of a language “from within” is Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). In this work, Ashcroft et al. examine Anglophone postcolonial literature from formerly colonized societies of the British Empire and show how this literature deploys different linguistic strategies to challenge imperial hegemony. According to Ashcroft et al., one core feature of linguistic decolonization is the separation between the standard language variety used and encouraged by the metropolis and the locally transformed linguistic practices of the imperial peripheries (1989, 7–8). By treating local vernaculars as

full linguistic practices in their own right, rather than as “broken” forms of the metropolis’ language, the metropolis’ authority over how the language should be spoken is challenged. Pluricentricity may thus carry a decolonizing potential.

This process is not only a matter of lexical and grammatical features, but also of what the language is made able to signify. Ashcroft et al. describe how the imperial language may lack the vocabulary needed to describe the realities of colonized spaces (1989, 9), and that the only way for the imperial language to become sufficient in these spaces is for it to be detached from the center and transformed. Vozna exemplifies this in a Ukrainian context by describing how Russian-speaking Ukrainians may use “[a] language that monolingual Russian-speaking outsiders may not easily understand (for example, references embedded in local folklore)” (Vozna 2021, 122). In such cases, the language remains Russian, but its meanings and references are locally anchored in ways that make it less immediately available to the Russian metropolitan center.

Ashcroft et al. describe this process through the concepts of abrogation and appropriation. Abrogation refers to the rejection of the idea that an authentic center holds authority over the language, while appropriation refers to the process through which the language is seized by colonial subjects and transformed to carry the meanings, experiences and lifeworlds of the colonized. In this thesis, the term subversion is used as an umbrella term for practices that deviate from standard language norms, in line with how Ashcroft et al. use it to describe strategies of appropriation (1989, 47–49, 152, 174). Subversion thus denotes practices of disobedience towards the linguistic norms advanced by the colonizing power. It is important to distinguish such practices from the bottom-up linguistic changes that naturally occur when a language comes into contact with other languages or spreads across large geographical areas. In a postcolonial context, such changes acquire an additional political dimension through agency: the language is seized from the center and used to speak back to it. Linguistic change is not decolonial in itself. It becomes a potential decolonial practice when it challenges the authority from which the linguistic norm derives. While subversive strategies are most often discussed in studies of postcolonial literature, I find the concept useful for investigating decolonization strategies in language use more broadly. Linguistic subversion holds the potential to challenge hegemony through playfulness and irony, in a manner similar to how postcolonial literature challenges imperial discourses by making, in Shkandrij’s words, “playful use of the stories, beliefs,

and rituals that constitute the colonial attitude, reprocessing them in order to generate its own identity” and by taking pleasure in “the use of parody and pastiche” (2001, 266). Subversion can thus be regarded as occupying a position between colonial and anti-colonial discourse: it “speaks back” to the empire and rejects imperial authority without necessarily replacing it with another essentialist discourse.

In the Ukrainian context, scholarly work on linguistic decolonization has mostly dealt with derussification, that is, the strengthening of Ukrainian and the reduction of Russian influence in the public sphere. Vozna (2021) makes a serious attempt to summarize different perspectives on possible decolonizing practices within Russophone communities in Ukraine, looking specifically at Kharkivites and how they mark distance from the Russian Federation while continuing to use Russian. Drawing on Anderson’s concept of imagined communities, Vozna (2021) shows how the Russian-speaking Ukrainians in her study construct a linguistic community of their own, one in which Russian-speaking Russians are not necessarily included. This makes it possible to conceptualize Russian in Ukraine as a local linguistic practice through which boundaries from Russia may be drawn. Vozna further describes how Russophone writers who write from “beyond the mainstream” (2021, 123) create distance from canonical Russian literature by exploring new, locally anchored themes, references, and cultural positions. This can be connected to Ashcroft et al.’s (1989) argument that the imperial language can be appropriated and replaced in a local context. In such cases, the decolonizing gesture does not necessarily consist in abandoning Russian, but in detaching it from Russian metropolitan authority and making it signify Ukrainian experience.

Averbuch (2023) examines linguistic strategies adopted by Ukrainian Russophone writers during wartime. Like Vozna and Puleri (see section 2.2.1), Averbuch identifies the notion that speaking Russian and performing Russian culture are not necessarily the same thing. He argues that linguistic decolonization may take different forms: for some writers, it involves abandoning Russian in favor of Ukrainian; for others, it involves attempting to deterritorialize Russian by detaching it from the Russian state, Russian literary institutions, and the ideology of “*ruskii mir*”. Moreover, Averbuch recognizes the painful aspects of self-decolonization, describing how some writers that continues to write in Russian likens the language with a cancerous tumor: it is a part of one’s own body, at first benign, but then it grows and becomes malign (2023, 157–158). The embodiment of language recurs in

Daria Tsymbalyuk's reasoning about "language as corporeal, as inseparable from tongue and throat and vocal cords, helps me think about language(s) dwelling within my body, language(s) being of my body and its lived experiences" (Tsymbalyuk 2023, 702). Tsymbalyuk describes the Russian language as something dead "inside my body" (702), pointing at the core in the postcolonial experience of hybridity: the colonizer's language is no longer something foreign imposed from the outside, but has become internalized, and decolonization thus requires something beyond just "removing" it. Tsymbalyuk acknowledges that this means that rejecting the Russian language is not possible for everyone, which further raises the need for exploring decolonization of the language "from within".

Biedarieva (2024, 82–88) offers one possible answer to this dilemma. Rather than reducing decolonization to a binary choice between the language of the colonizer and that of the colonized, she argues that the colonial function of the imperial language itself may be transformed. Russian may cease to operate as a vehicle of Russian imperial authority without necessarily disappearing from everyday life. Instead, Russophone Ukrainians may appropriate it in ways that detach it from the metropolis and contribute to what she terms a "decolonial release".

In a similar vein, it may also be possible to apply a postcolonial reading to the use of surzhyk. Indeed, as discussed in section 2.1, attitudes towards surzhyk have shifted considerably since Russia's full-scale invasion, from being regarded as a "linguistic pathology" to an accepted transitional step from Russian to Ukrainian. However, the possible decolonial dimensions of surzhyk remain relatively understudied. Bernsand discusses Ukrainophone purism discourses and pro-surzhyk discourses and positions them in an anti-colonial vs postcolonial paradigm, noting that "If traditional Ukrainophone discourse on surzhyk fights hybridity as part of a colonial cultural and linguistic heritage seen as ultimately threatening to the very essence of Ukrainianness, an emerging Ukrainophone 'pro-surzhyk' position argues in postcolonial terms for the appropriation and transformation of this hybridity for the benefit of Ukrainian language revitalization and nation-building" (Bernsand 2007, 196–197). Maxwell, Kudriavtseva and Skubii (2024) contribute to this discussion by highlighting surzhyk as a form of playful resistance. This opens the possibility to understand surzhyk alongside the subversive strategies described in the foregoing paragraphs. It is important to note, however, that in the case of hybridity and

mixed languages, the decolonial potential does not lie in the linguistic mixture itself. Such an interpretation risks implying that colonial language contact was inherently beneficial. Rather, the decolonial significance of hybridity lies in the idea that it offers a third space from which formerly colonized subjects can challenge restrictive norms and imposed identities originating both from the metropolis and from de-imperializing counter-narratives. Since surzhyk departs from the codified norms of both Ukrainian and Russian, it may function as a site from which standard language ideologies in both camps can be challenged: a potential linguistic third space.

2.3. Bringing the threads together

In the foregoing chapters, I have sought to engage with a wide and at times conceptually dispersed field. The purpose of this section is to draw these strands together and demonstrate how they form a coherent foundation for the analysis that follows. At the core of this foundation lies the assumption that despite scholarly attempts at positioning Russian as a pluricentric language, by taking into account the ways in which Russian is being used by its speakers outside Russia, the language ideologies perpetuated by the metropolis (Moscow), the idea of “*ruskii mir*”, make an actual pluricentric development much harder than simply recognizing different varieties. Contemporary Russian language ideologies instead act as an extension of the linguistic imperialist practices of the Russian empire, and subsequently the Soviet Union, and find their most extreme expression in the use of language as a justification for the invasion of Ukraine. Given these circumstances, the current situation can be summarized as follows: on the morning of February 24, 2022, many Ukrainians woke up formulating their first thoughts in a language whose linguistic norms and imagined “essence” were still being held firmly in place by hands that had, only hours earlier, dropped bombs on their cities. This raises questions on how individuals navigate the complex situation of meaning-making through a language that is being weaponized against them.

A second integral part of the foundation for my analysis is the assumption that the identity negotiation processes taking place in Ukraine since its independence in 1991 bears several resemblances to how postcolonial societies have navigated identity formation in relation to colonial legacies, specifically in regard to language. I thereby turn to the question of

whether a decolonization of Russian is possible under such conditions, and how practices that may be understood as forms of subversion, that is, as resistance to standard language ideology, emerge in the ways Russian-speaking Ukrainians reflect upon their language use.

Lastly, this foundation builds upon the assumption that the social realities being investigated in this thesis are relational. The metropolis' hegemonic power over linguistic norms relies upon the language users' recognition of these norms. In a similar manner, linguistic subversion can only function as a form of resistance against the metropolis' hegemony insofar as these norms are not merely present but upheld and expected: if deviation is tolerated or encouraged, there is nothing for subversion to resist. In regard to pluricentricity, it can function both as a form of decolonization and as a tool for linguistic imperialism, depending on how the actors involved (the metropolis and the speakers in the margins) situate themselves, and are being situated by each other, within this power structure.

3. Methodology

This chapter covers the method used for creating the empirical material and the reasoning behind the choice of method. Section 3.1 introduces qualitative interviews and discusses their suitability for exploring individuals' reflections on language, language use, and identity. Section 3.2 outlines the process of conducting the semi-structured interviews and explains how the central concerns of the study—how Ukrainians with Russian as their first language negotiate their linguistic identities, reflect on their language use and language norms, and whether postcolonial concepts such as linguistic subversion are useful for understanding these processes—were conceptualized and operationalized into the interview guide. This section further discusses ethical considerations, including my own positionality. Section 3.3 presents the thematic analysis.

3.1. Why interviews?

Interviewing as a research method emanates from an interpretivist understanding of knowledge, in which social realities are not treated as fixed or objectively given, but as relational, situated, and continuously constructed (King et al. 2019; Quarta 2026, 73–103). From this perspective, what can be known about the social world is not something that exists independently of those who inhabit it, but something that emerges through individuals' interpretations of their lived experiences. Interviews, then, are not a way of accessing an underlying “truth”, but of engaging with processes of meaning-making: how people understand, articulate, and negotiate their own positions within the social worlds they inhabit.

This makes qualitative interviews particularly suitable for this thesis, which is concerned not with language use as observable behavior in itself, but with how individuals reflect upon and reason about their own linguistic practices in relation to questions of identity, belonging, and power. These processes of meaning-making may be explored using a variety of methods, but interviews offer the researcher the flexibility to adapt the inquiry in real time by following new themes that emerge during the conversation and asking follow-up questions. In this sense, the data emerging from interviews are a product of both the participants and the researcher.

As Brinkmann (2022) suggests, they are better understood as sites where knowledge is co-constructed in interaction. The accounts produced in interviews are thus shaped by the questions asked, the context in which they are asked, and the presence of the researcher (Quarta 2026, 76). By acknowledging this, the material is situated and the conditions under which it is produced are made visible.

Qualitative interviews therefore offer insights into the reasoning and meaning making underlying individuals' ideas, opinions, and practices. As such, they constitute a research method well suited to this thesis. At the same time, the co-construction of data and the active role of the researcher require a high degree of transparency throughout the research process.

3.2. Making the material

3.2.1. Conceptualizing the inquiry and creating an interview guide

Before drafting the interview guide, I had to, once again, ask myself what it was that I actually wanted to know. There are a myriad of possible points of entry into discussions of identity negotiation, power structures, decolonization, and language use in Ukraine and, since these processes are unfolding in real time, the number of possible caveats is matched only by the number of potential analytical directions. To allow for flexibility while at the same time keeping the interviews aligned with the theoretical framework informing both the research questions and the analysis, I employed a semi-structured approach to interviewing.

In order not to lose sight of the core of my research inquiry, I formulated two overarching categories, which I then broke down into researchable variables: **ethno/linguistic identity** and **subversion**. The slash between “ethno” and “linguistic” is intentional. Since the core assumption of this thesis is that ethnic and linguistic identities can be, and in the case of Ukraine often are, negotiated as distinct phenomena, the label reflects this distinction while remaining concise. Subversion was employed as an umbrella term for language practices deviating from standard language norms and, in the context of this thesis, participants' ideas and reflections concerning such practices.

The ethno/linguistic identity category encompasses what I seek to understand about my participants' reflections on the relationship between ethnic and linguistic identity, how they position their linguistic identity in relation to standard language norms and purist ideologies, and whether, and in what ways, the war has shaped their reasoning on these issues. The subversion category, in turn, encompasses participants' reflections on language use and linguistic norms, including whether and how they relate to such norms in their everyday practices. Under each category I then formulated questions for my interview guide (see Appendix 2).

A recurring concern throughout this process was the sensitive nature of the topic. My participants are individuals affected by war, and more specifically by the fraught tensions surrounding their own linguistic identities—tensions that I, relatively comfortably at my desk, approached through a literature-based understanding. The challenge, then, was to formulate questions that would address my research aims while remaining attentive to the potential dissonance between my theoretical framing and my participants' lived experiences.

3.2.2. The participants and conducting the interviews

I reached out to potential participants through my own network of acquaintances who themselves are part of, or in different ways interact with, the Ukrainian diaspora in Sweden. For this purpose, I wrote a short invitation in both Russian and English informing potential participants about the study and providing my contact information (see Appendix 1). Approximately ten individuals expressed an interest in participating, but due to practical circumstances, full interviews were ultimately conducted with seven participants.

The sample consists of six women and one man between the ages of 31 and 67. The predominance of women reflects the gender composition of the recent Ukrainian refugee population in Sweden, although a broader gender representation would have been desirable. Since the participants' linguistic backgrounds are central to the analysis, a brief overview is provided below. All names are pseudonyms.

Lyudmyla, 67, from a small town in the Mykolaiv region. Degree in philology and vocational background in translation and editing. She grew up speaking Russian both at home and in school, learned Ukrainian in school, and describes Russian as her mother tongue.

Lesya, 53, from Mariupol. Secondary specialised vocational education in trade. She grew up speaking Russian with her family and attended a Russian-speaking school. Switched to use only Ukrainian after the full-scale invasion.

Solomiya, 31, from Kremenchuk in the Poltava region. Master's degree in electrical engineering. She grew up in a Russophone family and attended a Ukrainian-speaking school.

Anzhelika, 32, from Kharkiv. Master's degree in philology. She grew up primarily speaking Russian, although her mother spoke surzhyk at home. She attended a Ukrainian-speaking school.

Nataliya, 34, originally from a small town in the Kherson region, but later lived in Kharkiv. Master's degree in English and Russian. She grew up in a Russophone family and attended a Russian-speaking school.

Yevhen, 36, from a small town in the Kirovohrad region. Degree from Metallurgical academy. He grew up in a Russophone family and attended a Ukrainian-speaking school.

Halyna, 50, from Odesa. Vocational background in sales. She grew up in a Russophone family and learned Ukrainian in school.

The interviews lasted between approximately 35 and 90 minutes and were conducted in Swedish, English, or Russian, depending on the participant's preference. Unfortunately, I do not speak Ukrainian; otherwise, this would of course also have been an option. Prior to the interviews, I informed the participants that I understand Russian but may not always be able to formulate follow-up questions fluently in Russian. They were therefore encouraged to respond in whichever language they preferred and to switch freely between languages whenever they wished.

Since the participants live in different parts of Sweden, all interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using an AI-assisted transcription service. The transcripts were subsequently reviewed against the audio recordings and manually

corrected. I adopted an intelligent verbatim transcription approach, meaning that fillers, false starts, and repetitions that were not analytically relevant were omitted.

Quotations from interviews conducted in Swedish or Russian were translated into English by me. Quotations from interviews conducted in English are reproduced in the language in which they were given. In translating the quotations, I aimed to preserve the participants' wording and meaning as closely as possible while producing readable English. Minor adjustments were made where necessary for readability, without altering the meaning of the participants' statements.

3.2.3. Ethical considerations and potential biases

The topic explored in this thesis is politically sensitive. Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion, Ukraine's history of language policy as a site of political conflict, and the fact that all participants have fled a war mean that many of them have experienced events of a deeply traumatic nature.

The relationship between researcher and participants is inherently asymmetrical. The participants share their life worlds with me and must trust that I represent them fairly and accurately. To strengthen the credibility of my interpretations, participants were offered the opportunity to read the analysis before it was finalized. In a couple of cases, I also asked follow-up questions by email in order to clarify ambiguities that emerged during the analysis.

As a Swedish researcher, I occupy an outsider position in relation to the linguistic community studied. I understand and speak Russian, although not fluently. Through living and working in Latvia and Lithuania, I became familiar with the historical legacy of Russian linguistic and cultural dominance in the region. My academic studies have further shaped my understanding of Russian linguistic imperialism and postcolonial approaches to language. At the same time, teaching Swedish to newly arrived refugees and engaging with Ukrainian communities in Sweden on a voluntary basis enabled me to build relationships with people belonging to the linguistic group examined in this thesis. This combination of experiences has inevitably shaped both my access to participants and my interpretation of the material.

My own interest in this topic is also informed by the view that language is a site of historical power relations. I approach the question of linguistic autonomy from the Russian metropolis as an important one, both academically and politically, and this perspective has influenced the theoretical framework adopted in the thesis. At the same time, it has also required continuous reflexivity throughout the research process. Rather than attempting to eliminate my own position, I have sought to remain transparent about it and attentive to instances where the empirical material challenged my initial expectations, particularly regarding the extent to which participants themselves framed their language practices in explicitly decolonial terms. Throughout the analysis, I have therefore aimed to problematize instances where my own assumptions and theoretical interests may have influenced my interpretations and to ensure that the analytical claims remain grounded in the participants' accounts.

The sample should also be understood as a self-selected diaspora sample, and thus not representative of Ukrainians with Russian as their first language more broadly. The participants are relatively highly educated, with several with academic backgrounds in linguistics or philology. It is reasonable to assume that level of education and study subject may affect the inclination to volunteer as participant in a study like this. Furthermore, as all participants reside in Sweden, their reflections are formed in a diaspora context, and may not correspond to those of Russian speaking Ukrainians currently living in Ukraine.

3.3. Analytical approach

My approach to both conducting the interviews and the subsequent analysis was based on the notion of qualitative interviewing as a form of data creation rather than data collection, as described in section 3.2. Given this, the research process did not follow a linear structure of collecting, coding, and analyzing. Instead, it developed in a messier manner, in which my participants' responses continuously generated new ideas about how to approach the research questions.

The mode of analysis could be placed somewhere between inductive and deductive. Since the research process was already informed by a specific theoretical lens at the stage of formulating the research questions, namely a postcolonial perspective, there was a risk that the analysis would fall into the common pitfall of deductive research: confirmation bias (Brinkmann 2022). On the other hand, as Brinkmann notes, “There is no such thing as understanding something from nowhere, without presuppositions” (77). While the postcolonial perspective inevitably functioned as a lens through which I read the interview material, I remained open to the possibility that this perspective might prove insufficient or unsuitable in certain cases, as the analysis in Chapter 4 later demonstrates.

The research questions and theoretical framework provided an initial orientation towards questions of linguistic identity, language norms and possible subversion. I then read across the interview transcripts, noting recurrent ideas, similarities and contrasts between participants. I then grouped passages addressing related phenomena. The provisional groupings were compared across interviews and adjusted as recurring patterns became clearer.

The themes that emerged during this process, in dialogue with the categories informing the interview guide, were: (1) the separation of speaking Russian from performing a Russian ethnocultural identity; (2) the reallocation of linguistic domains; and (3) the (re)negotiation of language norms. These themes were therefore developed through comparison across the interviews and not determined in advance. The themes subsequently formed the basis for the analysis of possible patterns of decolonization. In line with the interpretive approach of this study, I do not understand these themes as objectively existing categories “discovered” in the material. Rather, I regard them as analytical patterns developed through my engagement with the participants’ accounts.

While analyzing the material, I moved continuously between broader recurring patterns and close readings of individual accounts. At the more detailed level, I paid attention to specific word choices and expressions that participants used to negotiate identity, language, and belonging whenever these proved analytically significant.

4. Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of the interview participants' stories, structured thematically. The themes covered are broadly based on the research questions. However, as mentioned in section 3.3, the analyzing process was highly intertwined with the interviewing process, and the themes are thus also informed by recurring tensions noticed in the participants' stories. The themes will be presented as follows: section 4.1 discusses how the participants reflect on the relation between their linguistic identities and their ethnic and/or national identities, presented through three sub-sections grouping the findings into categories of identity negotiation, language domains, and language norms. Section 4.2 then discusses possible patterns of decolonization strategies, focusing on linguistic subversion and whether this is an applicable theoretical paradigm.

4.1. Speaking and being: empirical patterns of identity, domains and norms

This section analyses how participants separate Russian as a language of upbringing, thought, and family from Russian as a national or political identity. This separation is not stable or uncomplicated. Rather, it is negotiated through a recurring division between Russian as an inner, private, and embodied language, and Ukrainian as the language of public belonging, collective identity, and national legitimacy.

4.1.1. Speaking and belonging: separating Russian language from Russian identity

When asked how they defined themselves in terms of ethnicity and nationality, the participants overwhelmingly identified as Ukrainian. Already at this point, before we had entered the more complex territory of situated identities and the role of language in identity construction and performance, it became clear that they drew distinct boundaries between their Russophone linguistic backgrounds and "Russian" as an ethnic, national or cultural identity. The following quotes support this interpretation by emphasizing the "Ukrainianness" of the participants' identities. Notably, in direct response to my question about identification, none of the participants framed their answers primarily as a negation of being Russian; that is, they did not define themselves by saying that they were not Russian. Instead, they affirmed their Ukrainian identity through markers such as "100%", "of course", and similar formulations. At the same time, several of these statements

introduced a contrast between Ukrainian identity and Russian linguistic background through the use of “but” and other contrastive phrasings:

“Of course I am Ukrainian and I speak Ukrainian, but I grew up entirely in Russian. I read books in Russian, I spoke with my mother and brother in Russian (...)” (Solomiya)

“I was born in Ukraine, I grew up in Ukraine, so I am Ukrainian. ... You can be 100% Ukrainian and still speak Russian. I think it is a type of thinking, not of speaking.” (Yevhen)

Yevhen’s answer positions Ukrainian identity as spatially and biographically grounded: he is Ukrainian because he was born and raised in Ukraine. His formulation presents Ukrainian identity as rooted in place and lived experience rather than an inherited “essence”. At the same time, he describes being Ukrainian as “a type of thinking”, contrasting it with Russian as “a type of speaking”. This distinction separates national identity from linguistic practice. In Yevhen’s reasoning, speaking Russian does not appear as an inherent contradiction to being Ukrainian, because language use is positioned as a communicative practice rather than as the primary marker of belonging. However, this separation does not mean that language is irrelevant to identity. Yevhen’s formulation rather suggests that different dimensions of the self are assigned different functions: Ukrainian identity is connected to place and thought, while Russian is connected to speech and everyday linguistic habit. In this way, he creates a clear division between two forms of self-expression without presenting them as mutually exclusive.

This contrasts with Solomiya’s more tentative formulation, where the “but” between being Ukrainian and growing up entirely in Russian marks a more explicit tension between national identity and linguistic background. While Yevhen’s answer resolves the possible contradiction by separating thinking from speaking, Solomiya’s phrasing leaves the tension more visible. The contrast between these two answers is thus analytically important: both participants separate Russian language from Russian identity, but they do so with different degrees of certainty and with different levels of expressed ambivalence.

Anzhelika expresses a similar separation between Russian-speaking background and Ukrainian identity, but adds a more reflexive layer by describing how the full-scale invasion changed her understanding of this relation:

“My national identity is 100% Ukrainian. Even before the full-scale invasion, when I did not think much about cultural or national questions, I still associated myself with Ukraine. Maybe it had to do with the fact that I went to a Ukrainian school, the literature we read there, and the songs we learned. I always identified myself as Ukrainian, even while speaking Russian. At that point, it did not seem like a problem to me. I did not see any contradiction in that.” (Anzhelika)

Anzhelika describes a strong sense of belonging to the Ukrainian nation, using the formulation “even before the full-scale invasion” to emphasize that her Ukrainian identity did not emerge as a direct consequence of the war, but already present, although perhaps less consciously reflected upon. She explicitly states that she “always” identified as Ukrainian, even while speaking Russian, and before the full-scale invasion, this combination did not appear contradictory to her. What changed after the full-scale invasion, then, was not her Ukrainian identification as such, but her reasoning around the compatibility of speaking Russian while being Ukrainian. The discrepancy between Russian linguistic background and Ukrainian national identity had existed before, but it became more visible and more difficult to leave unexamined. For Solomiya as well, the full-scale invasion meant a significant change in her reasoning regarding the relation between Russian-speaking background and Ukrainian identity:

“Yes, of course, Russian is part of Ukrainian identity for me. But if we ask whether we should continue speaking it with our children, I think maybe no. Maybe it should die more and more with our generation.” (Solomiya)

Solomiya makes a clear distinction between what Russian means to her own Ukrainian identity and what it should mean for coming generations. She admits that Russian is part of Ukrainian identity for her, but at the same time suggests that this does not necessarily have to be transmitted further. Russian is thus framed as a biographical and generational part of Ukrainian identity, but not a necessary or desirable part of its future.

In this sense, Solomiya’s reasoning differs from Anzhelika’s. Anzhelika describes a process in which the Russian-speaking part of her identity becomes increasingly difficult to sustain, whereas Solomiya accepts Russian as part of her own Ukrainian identity while questioning whether it should remain part of Ukrainian identity for future generations.

If the participants' positioning in relation to Russian and Ukrainian identity is understood as a spectrum, Anzhelika could be interpreted as occupying one end of this spectrum and Nataliya the other. When asked how she identifies, Nataliya describes her nationality as Ukrainian, but says that she feels "90% Russian". With a Russian father and a mother with roots in Kuban, her identity is presented as a matter of internal negotiation:

"And if you mean being Ukrainian, like real Ukrainian, like Western, Western Ukrainian, no. But unfortunately, Ukraine is not that Ukraine that was before the war, and people change so much."
(Nataliya)

When asked what Ukrainian identity contains, Nataliya answers:

"This is a person who can 100% speak Ukrainian in a proper way, following all these updates, not even in the language, in traditions, in culture, in celebrations and thinking in Ukrainian language also." (Nataliya)

Nataliya is less certain about her Ukrainian identity, since being "real Ukrainian" to her includes more than birthplace and upbringing. A Ukrainian should speak proper Ukrainian, follow changes in language and traditions, and also think in Ukrainian. In Nataliya's view, Ukrainianness is therefore not simply a static state of being, but something that is performed and maintained. This contrasts with Yevhen's more pragmatic reasoning, where being born and raised in Ukraine is sufficient for being Ukrainian. For Nataliya, Ukrainianness involves both outward practices and internal processes. To become Ukrainian in this sense would require changing both external language use and the inner language of thought. Given this, her hesitation around her own Ukrainian identity becomes understandable. Solomiya expresses a related kind of doubt, although in a different way:

"So, one of my friends, he has a hoodie with a non-nationality title on it, and I said, I should have this hoodie as well, because it's, I don't know, yeah, of course I'm Ukrainian, but maybe I'm not Ukrainian, because I'm not wearing a T-shirt, I'm not screaming like Ukrainian, let's eat borscht every day, so, I don't know." (Solomiya)

For Solomiya, Ukrainian identity is in one sense self-evident. At the same time, when she measures herself against what she perceives as public expectations of how a Ukrainian should appear or behave, she begins to doubt her Ukrainianness. Her uncertainty is not primarily about citizenship or origin, but about the performance of national identity. She contrasts her own less demonstrative way of being Ukrainian with more visible symbols of Ukrainian identity, such as clothing and explicit national enthusiasm.

Halyna and Lyudmyla also reflect upon Ukrainian identity as something they find difficult to perform, while at the same time expressing that Russian identity is something completely foreign to them:

“If we move to Russia, everything will be foreign to us; everything there is different from ours. Most importantly, we don't have this imperial grandeur.” (Lyudmyla)

In this quote, Lyudmyla describes Russia as *чужой* (chuzhoi). The word *чужой*, in the quote translated as “foreign”, carries slightly different connotations than its English counterpart. *Чужой* has an emotional dimension, describing something that belongs to someone else, something that is not mine or ours. It is used in phrases where the most suitable English option would often be “another” or “someone else’s”, to describe something as not from home. This suggests that the separation between Russian language and Russian nation, culture and ethnicity act on an existential and emotional level, rather than merely as a matter of administrative borders or geography. This contrasts with the *ruskii mir* narrative, which suggests a spiritual and existential connection between Russian speakers regardless of citizenship.

“We don’t have the Russian language or a Russian mentality; we just speak Russian. We love our state, our country, our nature.” (Halyna)

Halyna also challenges the *ruskii mir* narrative by clearly separating mentality from language use. Her statement that they do not “have” the Russian language is especially interesting. Given the broader context of the interview, where she also describes thinking in Russian, this cannot mean that they lack the language in a practical sense. Rather, “not having” Russian seems to refer to a distinction between using a language and owning or belonging to it in a collective sense. In this formulation, “having” the language is paired

with having a specific mentality, while “speaking” Russian is presented as a more limited linguistic practice. This distinction also appears in Halyna’s shorter formulation:

“It is hard to tell, I feel Ukrainian, but I think in Russian.” (Halyna)

Here, she contrasts “feeling Ukrainian” with “thinking in Russian”. The quote condenses much of the tension discussed in this section. Ukrainian identity is presented as affective and national, while Russian remains the language of speech or thought. The two are not collapsed into one another, but neither are they entirely separate. They coexist in a relation that Halyna herself describes as difficult to explain.

The participants' accounts illustrate a central tension associated with postcolonial hybridity: the difficulty of negotiating an identity situated between two binaries. For Solomiya, Nataliya and Halyna, the search for a vocabulary to define this third space is more clearly pronounced.

While several of the participants expressed that Russian language could constitute a part of a Ukrainian identity, Anzhelika describes a stronger rupture in this relation:

“Four years ago, I would have said yes. Now I do not believe that. ... After the full-scale invasion ... a lot of people started reconsidering history. ... We were blind, I don't know, which is also probably part of Russian propaganda. ... I came to the conclusion that actually Russian language is not native to Ukrainians. It was brought there. ... Russian to us, it's an alien thing.” (Anzhelika)

This marks a shift from separation to rejection. Earlier in the interview, Anzhelika describes having identified as Ukrainian even while speaking Russian and not seeing any contradiction in that. Here, however, she retrospectively reinterprets Russian in Ukraine as something historically imposed. The language that had once been compatible with Ukrainian identity becomes, after historical reconsideration, “alien”. This does not erase the fact that Russian may feel intimate or familiar to speakers, but it changes the meaning of that familiarity: what feels like part of the self can also be understood as the result of a longer colonial history.

Taken together, these quotes show that the participants do not simply replace Russian identity with Ukrainian identity, nor do they all relate to Russian in the same way. Rather, they separate Russian into different layers: Russian as language, Russian as state, Russian as ethnic or national identity, Russian as imperial mentality, and Russian as inner language. What is rejected is not always the language itself, but the collapse of these layers into one another. This separation is central to the participants' negotiation of Ukrainian identity as Russophone speakers.

4.1.2. Speaking and placing: private Russian, public Ukrainian and the reallocation of domains

The history of the Russian language in Ukraine has, as described in Chapter 2, been marked by an asymmetrical relation between Russian and Ukrainian. Bilaniuk, for example, describes how the “association of Ukrainian with provincialism, lower education, unculturedness, and weakness versus Russian with centrality, better and higher education, high culture, and strength” (Bilaniuk 2005, 38) was a recurring pattern in the narratives of her participants.

Bilaniuk conducted her study twelve years before the Revolution of Dignity and twenty years before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As more recent studies have shown, attitudes have changed since then (see Chapter 2). It was therefore not surprising that my participants spoke from a different historical and political position. What is worth acknowledging in the interviews, however, is that beyond the rejection of Russian as a public language there is also a reallocation of its domains. In several instances, the participants described Russian as intimate, embodied, and tied to family, memory, and thought, while Ukrainian was framed as the legitimate language of public life, national belonging, and collective responsibility.

This reallocation appears clearly in Halyna's account:

“You see, we think in Russian. We begin in Russian. That is why it is difficult for me to write in Swedish: first I have to compose the text in Russian, and then in Swedish. ... But if we return to Ukraine, we need to speak Ukrainian in the public language.” (Halyna)

Halyna describes Russian as her first language and the language in which she “begins” before translating into the language required by the situation. At the same time, she expresses a clear view of Ukrainian as the public language of Ukraine. There is no explicit conflict in this formulation. Russian and Ukrainian are assigned different roles: Russian is the language of thought and internal formulation, while Ukrainian is the language of public life.

Throughout the interview, Halyna is careful to emphasize that she is speaking about her own relation to Russian. She repeatedly marks her statements with formulations such as “for me”, “this is how it is for me”, and “I speak for myself”. She describes Russian as something that exists in her, as part of her, but she does not claim to express a general view of what role Russian should have in Ukraine. Russian is thus framed in Halyna’s responses as something private, individual, and subjective. It is of course possible to interpret this self-limiting language as a way of correcting herself in order to avoid saying something controversial. At the same time, Halyna does not express shame about her relation to Russian. Her reasoning therefore does not appear to stem primarily from a fear of being misread as non-Ukrainian, or from shame, but rather from a distinction between private linguistic attachment and public linguistic responsibility.

A similar distinction between private and public language use appears in Nataliya’s and Solomiya’s accounts, although here it is more explicitly connected to how speakers are perceived by others:

“When I am outside somewhere in western Ukraine and speak with my mother on the phone, I speak Ukrainian, while my mother answers in Russian. But when I am inside, for example inside the house or in my hotel room, I switch completely to Russian. Maybe it is not right, but I do it to keep myself safe.” (Nataliya)

“No, I do feel the conflict. Sometimes I am ashamed to speak Russian with my mother on the phone in public. I am afraid that if some Ukrainians hear me, they will think that I am Russian, and I do not want that.” (Solomiya)

Both Nataliya and Solomiya describe using Ukrainian in public when speaking to their Russophone mothers on the phone, but their motivations differ. Nataliya describes the

switch to Ukrainian as a matter of safety in public spaces in western Ukraine, where she perceives hostility toward Russian. Solomiya, on the other hand, describes the choice of Ukrainian as connected to shame and to the risk of being perceived as Russian by other Ukrainians. In both accounts, other people's perception plays a central role in language practice. Language choice is not just a matter of individual preference, but also of how the speaker may be read by others. Anzhelika describes a similar form of code-switching, but frames it less in terms of shame or danger and more in terms of what feels appropriate in a specific space:

“When I evacuated to western Ukraine, I always spoke Ukrainian outside the home: in shops, on public transport, in daily interactions. But inside the home, I still continued speaking Russian with my family and friends. Ukrainian felt more right outside. Russian sounded out of place there. I did not want to break the atmosphere, the general feeling.” (Anzhelika)

For Anzhelika, Russian sounds “out of place” in western Ukraine and using it would “break the atmosphere”. This formulation suggests that language is connected to spatial belonging. Russian does not simply index a certain identity, it also affects the atmosphere of the physical space. Despite being positioned differently in relation to Russian and Ukrainian identity, both Nataliya and Anzhelika identify a relation between language and place, where Russian does not fit easily into the public space of western Ukraine.

Lyudmyla expresses the distinction between public and private language use even more explicitly:

“I will speak Ukrainian in public space. If I write comments in Telegram channels, I write exclusively in very correct Ukrainian, without mistakes. And in the shop, I will speak Ukrainian. But inside, I will never betray my native language, because it is like dactyloscopy, like fingerprints. It is here in me. If I destroy this construction, my psyche may also be destroyed. Because language makes us.” (Lyudmyla)

The public/private distinction becomes especially pronounced through Lyudmyla's connection between language and the body. Russian is described as an inseparable part of her, like fingerprints. Changing or destroying this linguistic “construction” would also risk destroying her psyche, because, as she states, “language makes us”. The Russian that

creates her, however, is not the *ruskii mir*-Russian belonging to the Russian Federation or to Russian imperial identity, as discussed in section 4.1.1. Rather, it is a highly private, individual, and embodied language. Ukrainian, by contrast, is the language of public and collective matters: writing in Telegram channels, going to the shop, and appearing in public space.

This attaches Ukrainian to a certain responsibility of upholding and mediating collectivity. Nataliya also reflects on this. When I asked her what she felt when hearing Ukrainian being spoken, and what internal images the sound of the language evoked in her, her answer suggests that Ukrainian functions as a symbol and representation of Ukrainian autonomy:

“The only thing we were taught in school, when we were reading all those Ukrainian poets and everything, was the fight for freedom. ... the first thing that comes to my mind is a free woman, or a free young girl, running very fast somewhere in the field. There is a field and there is the sea from another side. ... The feeling of freedom I had every time when I was a child.” (Nataliya)

“I’m feeling some kind of pride, [...], because they are really strong country and Ukraine wasn’t taken in three days, or Kyiv wasn’t taken in three days, like Putin said. ... I’m really proud that, in spite of that, they continue working and doing something.” (Nataliya)

In Nataliya’s account, Ukrainian is a symbol of autonomy and independence. The sound of the language evokes images of freedom, childhood, poetry, and national endurance. In this sense, she attaches to Ukrainian functions that go beyond communication. The pride she describes is connected to the Ukrainian public and to the Ukrainian people as a collective. These associations contrast with Lyudmyla’s association of Russian with the self, the body, and the mind. In these accounts, Russian is more often attached to individual memory and embodied selfhood, while Ukrainian is more often attached to collective belonging, public legitimacy, and national continuity.

Nataliya further elaborates on the role of Ukrainian in the following quote:

“Maybe from one point of view, it was right because we have our own language and it has to be at least official. But at the same time, it's up to every person to decide if he or she wants to speak Ukrainian in daily life or not. ... It's very difficult to change a state of mind.” (Nataliya)

Ukrainian has to be “at least official”, meaning that it plays a necessary role for the Ukrainian nation and community in Nataliya’s reasoning. At the same time, she does not describe the same kind of private relation to Ukrainian as she does to her first language, Russian. This corresponds to a general pattern visible throughout the interviews: a reallocation of domains, where Ukrainian is viewed as the self-evident state language, representing Ukraine as a collective, while Russian becomes a matter for the private sphere, the family, and the self.

Even Anzhelika, who has deliberately shifted to Ukrainian, describes Russian as continuing to fill a function in family communication:

“Whenever I talk to my parents, I speak Russian because it feels strange speaking Ukrainian with them. But it's funny because when I text with them, I text in Ukrainian, but speaking mostly I speak Russian.” (Anzhelika)

Despite choosing to change her language to Ukrainian, Russian still functions as a language of speech with her parents. The fact that she uses Ukrainian in writing and Russian in speech may also be interpreted as a sign of a changed hierarchy: Ukrainian has become the written and more formal language, while Russian remains the spoken and familial one. Anzhelika also describes Ukrainian as a public sign of recognition and alignment:

“Language first is this sign ... like this identification, like I mean no harm. ... If somebody speaks Russian, I don't know what you're thinking ... because you support Russians, or because you're Russian ... So for me, Ukrainian is a sign that I'm on your side.” (Anzhelika)

Here, language is explicitly described as a “sign”. Ukrainian signals recognition, safety, and political alignment: “I mean no harm” and “I’m on your side”. Russian, by contrast, brings about uncertainty. The Russian-speaking person may be Russian, or may support Russia, or just someone who speaks Russian. This uncertainty makes Ukrainian into a

socially and politically legible sign, especially in contexts where Russian has become associated with threat or unwanted affiliation.

Belonging to diaspora enhanced this public role of Ukrainian for Anzhelika. I asked my participants which language they use when speaking to other Ukrainians in diaspora, and whether relocation outside Ukraine had affected their thinking around language use. Anzhelika describes how changing language became even more important when she first left Ukraine for Poland:

“We didn't want to be taken for Russians. ... In Ukraine, if you still speak Russian, you still understand that this is just a Ukrainian who speaks Russian. But outside, how do you identify? I want to be easily identified as a Ukrainian, so that's why I was speaking Ukrainian outside the country.” (Anzhelika)

Anzhelika's account points at language's function in regard to readability. Within Ukraine, Russian may still be understood as one possible Ukrainian language practice: “just a Ukrainian who speaks Russian”. Outside Ukraine, however, this local understanding is less available. Russian risks being interpreted as a sign of Russian identity, while Ukrainian makes Ukrainian belonging more immediately legible. In this sense, language functions as a public sign: it tells others something about the speaker, but what it tells them depends on the audience and on the political meanings attached to the language in that particular context.

This also gives language choice a political and affective dimension. Speaking Ukrainian becomes a way of avoiding misrecognition as Russian and of signaling alignment. It marks the speaker as Ukrainian, as not representing Russia, and, as Anzhelika puts it, as meaning no harm.

Solomiya's account shows a somewhat different kind of flexibility:

“Now I meet Ukrainians who speak Ukrainian and prefer Ukrainian. Of course, I switch to Ukrainian and speak fluently and no problem at all. But if I meet Ukrainians who prefer Russian, I can speak Russian.” (Solomiya)

Here, language choice is described as accommodation. Solomiya adjusts to the language preference of other Ukrainians. Her account therefore complicates a strict public/private division. Russian is not only private but can still function as a language of interaction between Ukrainians, provided that the interactional context allows it. At the same time, her formulation confirms that Ukrainian has become the unmarked choice when speaking to Ukrainians.

The distinction between private Russian and public Ukrainian was further visible in accounts where Russian was described as embodied, a part of the self, temporal, domestic and connected to memory.

“When I remember my childhood, everything is in Russian.” (Solomiya)

“As a person breathes, so they think in their native language.” (Lyudmyla)

Solomiya’s account reflect how Russian occupies a temporal and domestic domain, while in Lyudmyla’s account, the native language is compared to breathing, framed as an embodied condition of thought. In a similar vein of Russian as a part of the self, Anzhelika describes the emotional cost of language shift:

“It feels like you’re changing your personality. It feels like something about you was wrong and you have to fix it. ... I understand why people don’t want to do that.” (Anzhelika)

Although Anzhelika herself has chosen to shift toward Ukrainian, she recognizes that such a shift can feel like changing one’s personality. This is important because it complicates any simple understanding of language shift as straightforwardly liberating. For some speakers, shifting away from Russian may be politically meaningful and necessary, while still involving loss, discomfort, or a sense that part of the self is being altered. These accounts of embodied Russian and language shift as a loss of the self correspond with Averbuch’s and Tsymbaliuk’s reasoning on Russian in a postcolonial Ukrainian context as an embodied phenomenon as discussed in section 2.2.

There is further a connection between the private/public distinction and “having” Russian language and mentality, discussed in section 4.1.1. Linguistic ownership and mentality are

associated with belonging to a collective, with being part of a Russian imperial or *russkii mir*-oriented “we”. The participants’ accounts, however, repeatedly frame Russian as something more private and domestic: the language of home, childhood, thought, memory, and family.

Taken together, these accounts suggest a reallocation of linguistic domains that corresponds with the shift in meso-level language practices described in section 2.1.3. The emotional attachment to Russian remains, but is increasingly connected to the body, the psyche, and the private sphere. Ukrainian, by contrast, is associated with collective belonging, public legitimacy, and national continuity. Russian is not necessarily rejected as part of the self, but it is deprived of public authority and national legitimacy. Ukrainian, conversely, is strengthened as the language of public space and collective identity. Russian moves inward, while Ukrainian moves outward.

4.1.3. Speaking and conforming: standard language in times of upheaval

Regardless of how the participants positioned themselves in relation to the possibility of combining Ukrainian national identity with Russian as a first language, they all expressed some orientation toward standard language ideology. At the same time, this orientation was rarely straightforward. The participants often described spelling, grammar, correctness, and literary norms as important, but they also framed language as something living, situated, and shaped by speakers. To examine possible subversion of Russian from within in connection to decolonial patterns, I therefore asked several questions concerning my participants’ perceptions of “proper language”, their views on grammar and spelling, and their ideas about surzhyk and local Russian varieties in Ukraine.

Compared to the relatively clear narratives around identity and language choice discussed in sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2, the answers to these questions were more internally ambivalent. The participants often seemed to move between different positions within the same answer: between respect for standard norms and acceptance of linguistic variation, between correctness and speaker legitimacy, and between language as regulated form and language as lived practice. This suggests that questions of linguistic form had not necessarily been incorporated into the same coherent decolonial narrative as questions of identity and public language use. While the participants were often very clear that speaking Russian did not

make them Russian, they were less settled on whether non-standard speech, linguistic mixture, or Ukrainianized Russian could be understood as legitimate linguistic forms in themselves. Yevhen and Solomiya demonstrate this ambivalence well when elaborating on language rules and norms:

“I think you have to respect yourself and make the spelling correct. If you write in English, Ukrainian, Swedish or Russian, you should write correctly. ... When I write in Ukrainian, I respect Ukrainian the most. I know the rules. I studied in Ukrainian school for many years. Russian I mostly use in conversation, not so often in writing.” (Yevhen)

Later on in the interview, Yevhen explains how following new language norms should be a matter of individual choice:

“The government decides what the rules are. People can accept them or not. For me, it is strange to say ‘woman doctor’. I do not want to do that. So I continue to speak as I want, but if someone says it to me, I can say it.” (Yevhen)

Yevhen connects correct spelling to respect: both self-respect and respect for the language. His formulation is explicitly norm-oriented, but it is also significant that Ukrainian is the language he says he respects “the most”, while Russian is described as a language he mostly uses in conversation rather than in writing. Russian seems to fill a more instrumental function here, while Ukrainian appears as a language that carries a greater responsibility of proper use. This can be read as part of the shifted hierarchy discussed in section 4.1.2: Russian may still function as a language of communication, but Ukrainian is increasingly treated as a language that should be honored, protected, and used correctly. At the same time, he accepts the bottom-up aspect of language practices, describing how there may be linguistic norms but whether to follow them or not is a choice. The temporal aspect might be important in this chain of reasoning: norms that might be perceived as foundational to the language such as spelling are more important to respect than newer initiatives, such as introducing new gendered terminology. Solomiya’s reasoning is different, but equally ambivalent.

“Of course you should be very clear about language, you should understand ... this kind of rules, have I said it correctly or not, but you should speak as you feel ... you shouldn't feel ashamed ... if

you say it wrong or something like this, you can do what you can, you can do your best and do not be ashamed.” (Solomiya)

She states that speakers should understand the rules and know whether they have said something correctly. At the same time, she immediately softens this norm-oriented position by emphasizing that speakers should not feel ashamed if they make mistakes. Her answer reframes deviations from the standard as understandable and forgivable, especially when speakers are trying to speak Ukrainian. Correctness remains the ideal, but failure to reach it is not treated as a moral failure.

Lyudmyla, with her educational background in philology and several years of professional experience as a translator and language expert, elaborates on these matters in more detail:

“Language norms, yes. Nobody follows them. I always joke that I am the only one who knows what is correct, because a lot of people still make mistakes. Very often they make calques from Russian. They know a Russian expression and translate it literally, word by word, and think that it is correct, but it is not. ... When a phraseological expression is translated literally, it is wrong. One needs to look for an analogue, a correspondence.” (Lyudmyla)

Lyudmyla’s account is oriented toward correctness, and she objects most strongly to unreflected transfer from Russian into Ukrainian: literal translations and incorrect phraseology. Her concern is therefore more about maintaining the difference between the two languages. This emphasis on keeping the languages separated reflects the notion of languages as distinct, internally coherent systems that Bilaniuk describes, a notion that is challenged by actual language practice (Bilaniuk 2005, 2–8).

Anzhelika, who also has a master’s degree in philology, expresses a softer and more explicitly bottom-up view of linguistic norms:

“Language is ... constantly shifting and people actually decide what is right. So all the philologists might for now collect all the grammar rules, lexical rules, whatever pronunciation rules and say, okay, now this is standard, but things will be changing.” (Anzhelika)

Anzhelika accepts the existence of standard norms but does not treat them as fixed or final. Philologists may collect and codify rules, but speakers ultimately change language through use. Her position therefore comes closest to a usage-based understanding of language, where norms emerge from collective practice rather than being imposed from above. However, this liberal view of language does not extend without difficulty to Russian in Ukraine. When asked who owns a language, Anzhelika answered that it belongs to the people who use it. I therefore asked whether she believed that Russian belonged equally to Ukrainians who speak it as it does to Russia. Here, however, she was clear that she no longer regarded Russian as “ours”. As discussed in section 4.1.1, she described Russian as historically brought into Ukraine and as something alien to Ukrainians. Her reasoning is therefore internally tensioned: language in general belongs to its speakers, but Russian in Ukraine remains burdened by its colonial history.

In regard to claiming Russian as “ours”, Nataliya's account points in a somewhat different direction than Anzhelika's. She attaches strong emotional value to distinctly Ukrainian features within her own Russian:

”Yes, especially when I hear somewhere abroad someone saying *sho*, I'm ready to go and to hug that person because I know this is somewhere from... from that territories, and we are the same, we have the same problems, and Kharkiv is being bombed, south is under occupation...” (Nataliya)

This account expresses that regional variation as a marker of a shared, specifically Ukrainian, community, shaped by war. She later explains that she deliberately continues to pronounce *sho* even when speaking Russian with Russians, suggesting a conscious refusal to converge towards metropolitan linguistic norms.

Standard language ideology was further present in how some participants related linguistic correctness to their own identity negotiation. This appears especially clearly in Solomiya's account of why she sometimes feels hesitant about switching fully to Ukrainian:

“I feel myself like I'm wrong Ukrainian, because my Ukrainian is not so rich or specific ... like someone will laugh.” (Solomiya)

Here, language use is closely connected to shame and to the feeling of being a complete or incomplete national subject. Solomiya does not only describe her Ukrainian as linguistically insufficient; she describes herself as a “wrong Ukrainian”. Her formulation suggests that there is an implicit condition for being a “right” Ukrainian: one should have a rich, specific, and confident Ukrainian language. This echoes Nataliya’s description in section 4.1.2. Standard language ideology therefore, besides regulating linguistic form, shapes who can feel legitimate as a Ukrainian speaker. This points to the broader liminality discussed in section 4.1.1, mediated through discourses of standard language ideology.

The internally tensioned character of these accounts becomes especially visible in the participants’ reflections on surzhyk. Surzhyk was often first described through the language of error, shame, or improper mixture, but these assessments were repeatedly complicated by more pragmatic, affective, or speaker-oriented understandings. Solomiya describes how, when she started university, she met students from more rural areas who spoke surzhyk with pride:

“I was okay when they spoke surzhyk. Of course, it’s wrong, but I was thinking that in writing they should write Ukrainian. But when I saw the messages they were sharing in social media, they continued to write surzhyk. And for me it was a shame, like, oh my God, it’s wrong, how can you even write this, because for me it’s like you are laughing at the language.” (Solomiya)

Solomiya accepts surzhyk more easily in speech than in writing. In spoken interaction, surzhyk appears as something she can tolerate, but written surzhyk is described as shameful and as “laughing at the language”. This distinction suggests that writing carries a stronger obligation to conform to the standard. Speech may be more flexible and situated, while writing is expected to represent Ukrainian properly. Yet Solomiya does not remain within this strict evaluation. She later adds:

“But even now Ukrainian spoken in surzhyk is more Ukrainian than not speaking Ukrainian at all.” (Solomiya)

This addition changes the evaluation. Surzhyk is still not described as correct, but it is revalued in relation to the political and linguistic context, a reasoning that also appears in Anzhelika’s account:

“Previously, especially when I was in school, it was considered ... shameful. ... My mom would always switch to Russian when she spoke outside, for example, family or friend circles. ... There was definitely this disapproval. ... People would make fun, people would laugh at it. ... If someone would speak surzhyk now today, that would probably be a sign of them switching to Ukrainian and I would actually highly support them.” (Anzhelika)

Anzhelika describes a similar movement from shame to conditional acceptance. Initially regarding surzhyk as a possible sign of lower education and class and a target for other people’s mockery, she now interprets it differently: if someone speaks surzhyk, she reads it as a sign that they are moving toward Ukrainian. Anzhelika’s and Solomiya’s accounts reflect the broader trend of changing attitudes to surzhyk described in section 2.1.3. It is significant because surzhyk is not fully legitimized as a language form in itself. Rather, it is accepted as a transitional practice: a movement away from Russian and toward Ukrainian. In this sense, the liminality of surzhyk is embraced only to a certain extent. It is no longer simply rejected as “broken speech”, but it is still valued primarily because it points beyond itself.

However, surzhyk is not only described as a gateway to Ukrainian. In Nataliya’s and Yevhen’s accounts, it also appears as a playful and situated part of the speaker’s linguistic repertoire:

“My surzhyk is not so strong ... sometimes when I want to make it fun I'm starting speaking mixed Ukrainian and Russian. ... My mom doesn't like it: stop, speak Ukrainian or speak Russian. ... If I hear a person speaking surzhyk, I can switch to surzhyk just to have fun.” (Nataliya)

“When I was a child, we also used surzhyk. We used surzhyk because it was fun for the children. And we learned to use it in different ways.” (Yevhen)

Here, surzhyk is framed as a code that can be used for specific social and affective purposes. Nataliya describes switching into surzhyk “to have fun”, and Yevhen connects it to childhood play and to learning to use language “in different ways”. These accounts suggest that surzhyk may occupy a position within a broader linguistic repertoire, rather than merely outside the boundaries of correct language. It can mark informality, humor,

regional familiarity, or shared social context. In this sense, surzhyk is still subordinated to standard norms, but it is not placed outside language. It is assigned a function that neither standard Ukrainian nor standard Russian can fully fulfil.

In summary, these accounts show a presence of standard language ideology in negotiation. Standard norms are important, especially in writing and in Ukrainian, but they are also negotiated in relation to speaker's experiences, regional varieties and sociopolitical context. Although these findings provide limited support for understanding everyday linguistic practices as subversive in the sense proposed by Ashcroft et al. (1989), they nevertheless point towards a gradual weakening of rigid standard language boundaries, particularly in relation to surzhyk.

4.2. Speaking and resisting – a possible postcolonial analytical lens

One of my aims with this study was to explore whether there are traces of decolonization processes within the Russian language, i.e. processes where Russian speakers use the Russian language to “speak back” to the metropolis by adopting different strategies, such as subversion of linguistic norms, the use of mixed language, and so on. I initially sought to explore this inquiry through the participants' spontaneous reflections. However, when the issue did not always emerge organically, I asked targeted follow-up questions in some of the interviews about whether the participants had any thoughts on marking distance from Russia and what role language might play in this. In my interview with Lesya, I asked her whether she thought it was possible to protest or mark resistance toward Russia in the Russian language. Her account was particularly interesting:

“I actually do that already. There was once in my SFI class, there are a lot of students speaking Russian there, and there was one woman who spoke about how Russia is not doing all these things, that it is exaggerated in media and so on. And so I answered her in Russian, I told her she was wrong and I spoke for Ukraine, and she was very puzzled and said ‘but why are you so negative to Russia, you speak Russian now’, and I said that I use Russian so that she could understand what Russia does to us.” (Lesya)

Lesya is, together with Anzhelika, the only participant who has made the deliberate and conscious choice to fully reject Russian and use only Ukrainian. Her linguistic shift also needs to be understood in relation to her own experience of the war. During the war, Lesya

was injured in an explosion that left her blind in one eye. Her subsequent rejection of Russian and rapid shift towards Ukrainian emerged as part of a profound reassessment of her own linguistic practices and a direct response to Russian violence. This also opens up for discussing a limitation in how subversion has been conceptualized in this thesis. Within the framework developed from Ashcroft et al., subversion primarily concerns practices that appropriate or disrupt the norms of the imperial language from within. Lesya's shift to Ukrainian falls outside this narrower definition, although in a broader sense it can clearly be understood as a radical act of linguistic resistance. In her case, an anti-colonial rejection of the imperial language may simply be more meaningful than a postcolonial engagement with hybridity, linguistic play or a Third Space. The possibility of such a space may exist without speakers themselves assigning political or identitarian significance to it.

Lesya still sees the possibility of using Russian to speak back. Although this is not an example of decolonial subversion of the kind that bell hooks describes as taking "broken bits of English and made of them a counter-language. (...) in such a way that the colonizer had to rethink the meaning of English language" (hooks 1994, 224), it may still function as an example of decolonization. This is significant in the case of Russian, where the metropolis has weaponized the language in such a deliberate and extensive manner. Official Russian language ideology has invested the Russian language with a symbolic value as the expression of a supposedly great Russian mind and culture. Criticizing Russian imperialism in Russian therefore becomes a more politically charged act than it might otherwise have been.

Another trace of decolonial thought that appeared in the material was Anzhelika's account of deliberately ignoring mistakes in Russian grammar and pronunciation:

"When I was speaking Russian, it was very important for me to speak correctly: to get all the stresses right, use the right forms, and maybe even correct someone if they said something wrong. But the full-scale invasion made me reconsider a lot of things. Now, if I hear somebody speak Russian and make mistakes, I still hear it, but I do not see a reason to say anything about it. Maybe it is also an inner protest." (Anzhelika)

Describing the decision not to correct other people's mistakes as an "inner protest" exemplifies how Anzhelika, especially since the full-scale invasion, has developed her own

strategies for dealing with linguistic decolonization. Refusing to spend energy on upholding Russian language norms is a choice that speaks to her desire to make Russian obsolete in a Ukrainian context, to turn her back on Russian, and to withdraw from participating in the Russian metropolis' continued hegemony over Russian speakers.

Beyond these two accounts, explicit postcolonial resistance is only weakly present in the material. If pluricentricity is regarded as a possible pathway toward linguistic decolonization, there are some traces of an emerging pluricentric orientation, but they remain limited. Several participants describe existing varieties of Russian, although not as embryos of new standardized varieties. Rather, they are described as informal dialects, and support for these varieties as possible vehicles of decolonization is weak. Anzhelika responds in the following way when asked whether she believes there is space for a Ukrainian Russian after the war:

“There is already something like that going on. The deviations mostly come in pronunciation. For example, in the city I am from, people who speak Russian pronounce some sounds differently. In standard Russian there is this g sound, but we say h. Some people say that this is already our language, but I still feel that no, probably not.” (Anzhelika)

Her answer acknowledges that Russian spoken in Ukraine contains local features, but she stops short of recognizing these features as forming a language variety that can be claimed as “ours”. This hesitation suggests that although local differentiation from Moscow-centered Russian exists at the level of actual linguistic practice, it does not necessarily exist at the level of linguistic ownership or ideological recognition.

It is, however, crucial to recognize that pluricentricity in itself is not evidence of the decolonization of a language. As discussed in section 2.1, pluricentric development may even function as a continuation of imperial control. In the context of Russian, one possible scenario would be a pluricentric development supported, implemented, and reinforced by the metropolis. This could produce a situation in which speakers of different varieties of Russian still adhered to the metropolis' vision of a Russian-speaking world. Resistance requires something to resist. For pluricentric development to function as resistance, the language ideologies of the metropolis must therefore remain centered on monocentrism.

Given this, and in accordance with the findings of this study, the ongoing decolonization process in Ukraine is most clearly performed through the shift from Russian to Ukrainian. It could be argued that the strong standard language ideology expressed in relation to Ukrainian reflects an anti-colonial rather than a postcolonial or decolonial pattern. However, the changing attitudes toward surzhyk complicate this interpretation. It is here that the postcolonial condition becomes most visible: in the ambiguity and liminality of a mixed linguistic practice that has not yet been pushed into the frame of a codified standard variety.

Decolonization may therefore also take place through the gradual acceptance of surzhyk, a finding that corresponds with previous discussions on the subject (see section 2.2.2). What speaks against this interpretation is that surzhyk is still often regarded as a step toward full Ukrainian rather than as a complete linguistic identity in itself. At the same time, it is precisely in this liminality that the postcolonial condition appears. If decolonization is understood as practice rather than as a static condition, and as a performance of a wide range of possible identities rather than as a singular state of being, then surzhyk's role as a playful way of engaging with language becomes especially significant. It could then be interpreted as echoing the playfulness and irony of early Ukrainian postcolonial authors, who used humor to challenge fixed roles and inherited hierarchies. On the other hand, the subversive traits of such linguistic play are situated and dependent on the attitudes and ideology of the metropolis. Everyday linguistic practices only become subversive in this sense when they challenge the metropolis, or rather, when the metropolis feels challenged. In order for a practice to be a form of resistance, there must be something to resist. Surzhyk is almost only discussed in relation to Ukrainian, accounts on how it (and other mixed varieties of Russian) is dealt with in Russian standard language discourse are rare.

The war has, of course, changed the conditions for this kind of playfulness. If anything, it has strengthened anti-colonial forms of resistance and placed greater pressure on the postcolonial, because there is little that is "post" about a colonial process that is unfolding in the present. There is also limited space for experimenting with a spectrum of identities when one side weaponizes any trace of its language, while the other is fighting for survival.

The reallocation of domains that was present in many of the participants' accounts could also be interpreted through Biedarieva's notion of decolonial release. When Russian's function as public language at the meso-level and its symbolic value is weakened, this undermines the metropolis' hegemony. The relocation of Russian from public to private domains can therefore be understood as one possible expression of decolonial transformation.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have sought to examine how Ukrainians with Russian as their first language negotiate their linguistic identities in relation to their identities as Ukrainians during the ongoing war. Furthermore, within a postcolonial theoretical framework, I have explored whether linguistic subversion, here understood as linguistic practices that challenge standard language norms, is an applicable concept for understanding linguistic decolonization in the Ukrainian context. Based on the assumptions that (1) the language policies and ideologies of the Russian Empire and subsequently the Soviet Union may be understood as a form of linguistic imperialism; (2) the sociolinguistic situation in independent Ukraine has been profoundly shaped by this imperial legacy; (3) the official language ideologies of the Russian Federation in many respects constitute a continuation of this legacy; and (4) post-1991 Ukrainian sociocultural and sociolinguistic conditions can be read through a postcolonial lens, I conducted qualitative interviews in order to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Ukrainians with Russian as their first language negotiate their linguistic identity in relation to their ethnic and national identity?

My findings largely correspond with previous research, suggesting that linguistic identity is negotiated primarily through three strategies: separating the Russian language from the Russian nation, allocating Russian and Ukrainian to different social domains, and, in some cases, abandoning Russian in favor of Ukrainian across all domains. Throughout the material, language is consistently separated from ethnicity and national belonging. This separation is expressed through a reallocation of linguistic functions. Russian is associated with intimacy, childhood, family, memory, and the embodied self, while Ukrainian is associated with public life, collective belonging, and the Ukrainian nation. Two participants ultimately found this negotiation unsatisfactory and deliberately switched to Ukrainian. Overall, the findings demonstrate that these negotiations are diverse rather than uniform.

RQ2: How do the participants reflect on their language practices in relation to standard language ideologies?

The participants generally reproduce elements of standard language ideology and value linguistic correctness. At the same time, the political meaning of correctness has changed since the full-scale invasion. One participant explicitly describes abandoning the practice of correcting mistakes in Russian as a form of protest. Russian standard norms gradually lose symbolic authority, while discussions of correctness increasingly concern Ukrainian. Metropolitan Russian is not presented as the desirable linguistic norm. At the same time, attitudes towards surzhyk become more accepting, suggesting that the boundaries of legitimate language use are becoming more flexible.

RQ3: To what extent is the concept of linguistic subversion a useful analytical lens for understanding decolonial language practices among Ukrainians with Russian as their first language?

My findings provide only limited support for linguistic subversion as an analytical concept. The participants recognize distinctly Ukrainian varieties of Russian, and these varieties are often described as feeling more familiar or "at home" than metropolitan Russian. However, they are rarely understood as explicit decolonial practices. The strongest example of linguistic decolonization in the material remains the deliberate shift from Russian to Ukrainian. This also suggests that linguistic resistance may take forms that fall outside the narrower concept of subversion employed in this thesis, particularly where an anti-colonial rejection of the imperial language is more meaningful to speakers than its appropriation or transformation from within. Compared with the more conscious political strategy of switching languages, "Ukrainian Russian" remains a much more diffuse and indexical category. Surzhyk occupies an equally ambiguous position. From a theoretical perspective, it may be understood as a possible site of decolonization or, borrowing Bhabha's terminology, a linguistic Third Space. My findings nevertheless suggest that surzhyk is still primarily regarded as transitional rather than as a linguistic position in its own right. The reallocation of linguistic domains identified throughout this study may instead be interpreted through Biedarjeva's concept of decolonial release. As Russian gradually loses its public functions and symbolic authority, it is simultaneously detached from the metropolis and deprived of part of its imperial significance.

All in all, these findings suggest that linguistic decolonization among Ukrainians with Russian as their first language can be, aside from abandoning Russian altogether, a question of transforming its social meanings and functions. While explicit attempts to renegotiate Russian itself remain relatively limited, participants consistently separate the language from Russian national belonging and relocate it to domains associated with intimacy, memory, and embodiment, while Ukrainian increasingly occupies public and collective domains. Linguistic decolonization therefore emerges as a range of negotiations through which inherited relationships between language, identity and political belonging are reconfigured.

This study contributes to the broader discussion of the place of the Russian language in contemporary Ukraine by illustrating the diversity of identity negotiations among Russian-speaking Ukrainians. It also contributes to discussions of postcoloniality in the Ukrainian context by suggesting that concepts developed in other postcolonial settings, such as linguistic subversion, do not necessarily translate directly to Ukraine. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that postcolonial perspectives remain analytically productive, particularly for understanding hybridity, liminality, and the changing social functions of language. The ongoing war has fundamentally altered the conditions under which these negotiations take place, and its eventual outcome will inevitably shape future processes of linguistic decolonization. The reallocation of linguistic domains observed in this study also points towards the possibility of Russian remaining a private language detached from the normative authority of the metropolis.

This study has several limitations. Given the relatively small sample of seven participants, the findings should not be regarded as representative of Russian-speaking Ukrainians more generally. Furthermore, all participants currently reside outside Ukraine. Their experiences as members of the Ukrainian diaspora are likely to influence both their language practices and their negotiations of identity, and their reflections might have differed had they remained in Ukraine. Finally, qualitative interviews cannot be used to establish broader sociolinguistic trends. Rather than offering a blueprint of how Russian-speaking Ukrainians think and act, this thesis should be understood as an exploration of possible ways of interpreting linguistic decolonization in the Ukrainian context.

Future research could expand the participant group in order to capture a broader range of experiences. Particularly interesting inquiries include comparing Russian-speaking Ukrainians living inside and outside Ukraine, following processes of language change over time, examining language practices in naturally occurring interaction, such as conversations or social media, and further exploring the role of surzhyk as a possible site of decolonization.

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7. Appendix 1

This text was circulated through acquaintances in order to reach potential participants with whom I was not in direct contact myself:

Здравствуйте!

Сейчас я пишу магистерскую работу по восточно- и центральноевропейским исследованиям в Лундском университете. Моя работа посвящена русскому языковому империализму и тому, как люди ему сопротивляются. Поэтому я ищу украинцев, для которых русский — родной или основной язык, для участия в интервью.

В ходе интервью мы поговорим о том, как вы воспринимаете место русского языка в украинской национальной / этнической идентичности, а также о таких вопросах, как языковые правила и нормы. Все ответы будут анонимными и использованы в моём исследовании.

Если хотите поучаствовать, напишите мне по адресу: [email address removed]
Большое спасибо!

Hello!

I am currently writing my master's thesis in East and Central European Studies at Lund University. My thesis focuses on Russian linguistic imperialism and how people resist it. I am therefore looking for Ukrainians for whom Russian is a native or primary language to participate in an interview.

During the interview, we will talk about how you perceive the place of the Russian language in Ukrainian national and/or ethnic identity, as well as questions such as language rules and norms. All responses will be anonymized and used in my research.

If you would like to participate, please contact me at: [email address removed]

Thank you very much!

8. Appendix 2

Interview guide

Ethno/linguistic category

What language did you speak in your family when you grew up?

What language did you use in school?

What language did you use with friends?

Do you use Ukrainian or Russian more often?

Do you switch between Ukrainian and Russian depending on context?

Do you feel Ukrainian?

What does it mean to be Ukrainian?

Do you think a person can have multiple cultural identities? Or do you have to choose?

What, or who, decides a person's identity?

How did the war affect how you think about your identity?

How did the war affect how you think about language?

How did relocating to Sweden (or other country) affect how you think about language and identity?

When the war is over, do you think it will be possible to use Russian language in Ukraine?

Subversion category

Is there a specific Ukrainian way of speaking Russian do you think?

Is it important to follow language rules, for example using correct spelling and grammar?

Is it equally important in all languages?

How do you feel about surzhyk? Do you speak surzhyk?

Do you sometimes use swearwords? If so, in what language do you most often use swearwords?

Who do you think should decide over such things as grammar and spelling rules?

Do you think the proper use of a language should be regulated by laws?