



The University of
Tehran Press

Journal of Foreign Language Research

Online ISSN: 2588-7521

Journal Homepage: <https://jflr.ut.ac.ir/>



Surzhyk in Ukraine: Linguistic Hybridity, Social Attitudes, and Postcolonial Resistance A critical review of recent scholarship (2000-2024)

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Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:
Received: 7 February 2026
Received in revised form: 18
April 2026
Accepted: 19 April 2026
Available online : 22 June
2026

Keywords:
Surzhyk,
Mixed language,
Bilingualism,
Postcolonial linguistics,
Language ideology

ABSTRACT

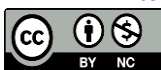
Objective: This article provides a comprehensive review of contemporary scholarship on Surzhyk, the Ukrainian-Russian mixed code, examining its role within Ukraine's postcolonial trajectory, wartime identity transformation, and complex sociolinguistic diversity.

Methodology: Drawing on 17 recent peer-reviewed studies and dissertations, it analyzes Surzhyk's structural features, regional and generational variations, symbolic and ideological dimensions, and evolving public attitudes.

Findings: The review integrates linguistic, sociological, and computational perspectives to demonstrate how Surzhyk operates both as a communicative strategy and as a site of ideological negotiation, reflecting speakers' agency and adaptive practices. The paper argues for a reevaluation of Surzhyk not as a degraded or chaotic hybrid but as a dynamic, strategic, and ideologically charged linguistic phenomenon reflecting Ukraine's complex historical and geopolitical reality. It also explores the implications of computational modeling for Surzhyk in digital linguistics and highlights its emerging role in Ukraine's broader efforts toward linguistic decolonization, cultural resilience, and the affirmation of hybrid identities.

Conclusion: Surzhyk serves as a prominent case in broader debates on language standardization, linguistic stigma, and the politics of authenticity in post-imperial contexts and recent sociopolitical shifts, particularly after 2014 and 2022, have intensified the symbolic stakes of mixed speech and reshaped the relationship between language choice and national belonging. By synthesizing findings across disciplines, the review identifies key tensions between prescriptive language ideologies and everyday communicative realities, while outlining directions for future research on Surzhyk in education, media discourse, and digital communication.

Cite this article: Fakhrian, F. and Abbasi, A. (2026). Surzhyk in Ukraine: Linguistic Hybridity, Social Attitudes, and Postcolonial Resistance A critical review of recent scholarship (2000–2024). *Journal of Foreign Language Research*, 16(2), 259-271. <https://doi.org/10.22059/jflr.2026.408879.1275>



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Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22059/jflr.2026.408879.1275>

1. Introduction

Language is never neutral; it encodes power, identity, history, and resistance. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Surzhyk, the hybrid speech form arising from the interweaving of Ukrainian and Russian elements. While frequently stigmatized as a marker of poor education, low social class, or linguistic confusion, Surzhyk defies simple categorization. Its existence and continued usage reflect deeper tensions within Ukrainian society: between imperial legacies and national resurgence, between linguistic standardization and communicative pragmatism, and between marginalization and reclamation.

Since the early 2000s, and particularly after the Revolution of Dignity (2014) and the Russo-Ukrainian War (2022), the sociopolitical context surrounding Surzhyk has undergone rapid transformation. No longer viewed simply as a corrupted form of speech, Surzhyk has become the subject of renewed scholarly attention - including morphosyntactic analyses (Kent, 2012) and ideological reframings of decolonization (Maxwell, Kudriavtseva, & Skubii, 2024).

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Surzhyk over the past two decades, existing research remains fragmented across different disciplinary traditions. Linguistic studies have primarily focused on structural and morphosyntactic aspects of Surzhyk, while sociolinguistic and ideological analyses have examined questions of identity, stigma, and language policy. More recently, scholars have begun to explore the implications of linguistic decolonization and digital language technologies for the study of mixed codes. However, these strands of research are rarely examined together within a single analytical framework. Furthermore, the profound sociopolitical transformations that have taken place in Ukraine since 2014, and especially after 2022, have significantly altered the symbolic and social meanings associated with Surzhyk. Therefore, a comprehensive review is necessary to synthesize current knowledge, identify emerging trends, and reassess the role of Surzhyk in contemporary Ukrainian society.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive and critical review of Surzhyk as a linguistic and sociopolitical phenomenon. Drawing on 17 academic sources published between 2000 and 2024, it addresses four interrelated questions:

1. What is the linguistic structure of Surzhyk, and how does it differ from code-switching or dialect mixing?
2. How do Ukrainian speakers perceive Surzhyk socially, ideologically, and emotionally?
3. What historical and geopolitical forces have influenced the development and meanings of Surzhyk?
4. Can Surzhyk be reinterpreted as part of Ukraine's broader project of linguistic decolonization?

To answer these questions, we have organized the article into thematic sections addressing historical emergence, linguistic patterning, social perception, ideological tensions, regional variation, and theoretical classification. By doing so, we argue that Surzhyk cannot be reduced to a transitional code but must be understood as a complex, layered, and evolving communicative practice.

2. Methodology and Source Selection

This article adopts a narrative critical review approach to synthesize contemporary scholarship on Surzhyk published between 2000 and 2024. Relevant studies were identified through searches conducted in major academic databases and search platforms, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and discipline-specific publications in Slavic studies and sociolinguistics. Search terms included “Surzhyk”, “Ukrainian-Russian mixed speech”, “mixed language”, “language ideology”, “bilingualism in Ukraine”, “linguistic hybridity”, and “language policy in Ukraine.”

The selection process focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, book chapters, and doctoral dissertations that directly addressed the linguistic, social, ideological, or computational dimensions of Surzhyk. Studies were included if they provided original empirical findings, theoretical analyses, or substantial reviews relevant to understanding Surzhyk as a linguistic and sociocultural phenomenon. Preference was given to recent publications while also retaining several foundational works necessary for historical and theoretical contextualization.

A total of seventeen scholarly sources were selected for detailed analysis. These sources were examined thematically and organized into major areas of inquiry, including historical development, linguistic structure, social attitudes, language ideology, regional variation, linguistic classification, and computational modeling. Through this thematic synthesis, the review aims to provide an integrated understanding of Surzhyk and its evolving role within contemporary Ukraine.

3. Historical and Theoretical Background

To understand Surzhyk, one must consider Ukraine’s long history of linguistic subordination, imperial domination, and shifting national ideologies. For centuries, the Ukrainian language was marginalized under Russian imperial and later Soviet rule, where it was treated as either a peasant vernacular or a politically suspicious code. During the tsarist era, decrees such as the Valuev Circular (1863) and the Ems Ukaz (1876) explicitly restricted Ukrainian-language publication and education. In the Soviet period, while there were brief phases of *korenizatsiya* (nativization), they were soon replaced by policies of Russification,

especially after the 1930s, which relegated Ukrainian to the symbolic domain and elevated Russian as the prestige language of science, urbanity, and social mobility (Moser, 2016).

Surzhyk emerged in this context as a byproduct of asymmetrical bilingualism - not fully Russian, not purely Ukrainian, but something in-between. Scholars such as Sériot (2005) and Khmelevsky & Savchenko (2000) have described this triple-code situation as a kind of post-diglossic continuum, in which linguistic practices evolve not in clear registers but in overlapping domains, determined by region, class, urbanity, and ideology. Importantly, Surzhyk is not a homogenous or stable code. It varies greatly between geographical zones (e.g., Black Sea region vs. Central Ukraine), across generations, and even in register (formal vs. informal), making it a uniquely fluid form of linguistic adaptation (Hentschel & Taranenko, 2022).

The theoretical debate surrounding the classification Surzhyk has focused on whether it is a pidgin, a mesolect, a mixed code, or simply a form of code-switching gone awry. Bamshadi and Davari Ardakani (2019) argue that code-switching and mixed-language varieties should not be regarded merely as linguistic deviations or deficiencies, but rather as systematic and functional outcomes of bilingual interactions. Del Gaudio (2023) argues against reducing Surzhyk to “linguistic pollution,” highlighting its communicative functionality and social embeddedness. Similarly, Kostiučenko (2023) and Levchuk (2024) delve into Surzhyk’s ideological dimensions: Is it a sign of inferiority, or a form of resistance to linguistic purism? Is its presence a linguistic scar left by colonial violence - or a symbol of cultural hybridity?

The thus obtained status, therefore, frames Surzhyk within a postcolonial linguistic theory, where languages are not neutral tools, but sites of power, hierarchy, and identity negotiation. Surzhyk, like many hybrid codes in post-imperial settings, resists easy categorization because it reflects shifting allegiances, fractured histories, and multivalent identities. Therefore, it must be studied not just as a structure, but as a sociopolitical phenomenon.

4. Linguistic Structure and Internal Logic of Surzhyk

One of the most striking developments in recent years is the partial stabilization of Surzhyk in certain communities. Hentschel & Taranenko (2022) argue that in places like the Black Sea coast, Surzhyk is no longer simply a “temporary” register or product of incomplete acquisition -it is a stable communicative code, especially in oral discourse. Similarly, Kuznetsova (2023) shows that speakers consciously choose Surzhyk over monolingual options based on context, audience, and perceived identity needs. Despite its reputation for inconsistency or chaos, Surzhyk demonstrates a surprising degree of internal logic, especially in contexts where it is used regularly across generations. Rather than viewing Surzhyk merely as a “broken” Ukrainian or Russian, recent linguistic research -particularly that of Hentschel (2023) and Kent (2012) -

has revealed consistent patterns of morphosyntactic blending, lexical borrowing, and even inflectional stabilization in Surzhyk variants.

Surzhyk often blends Ukrainian inflectional systems with Russian stems, or vice versa. For example, speakers may use Russian-derived verbs with Ukrainian conjugational endings or apply Ukrainian grammatical gender rules to Russian nouns. As Hentschel & Palinska (2024) demonstrate in their study of infinitive forms, certain morphosyntactic features of Surzhyk are becoming systematized in specific regions of Ukraine, particularly in the south and center. These forms are not random but reflect a pragmatic hybridization aimed at maximizing mutual intelligibility while maintaining expressive economy.

Recent sociolinguistic studies also provide authentic examples of Surzhyk usage in everyday communication. Kuznetsova (2023), for instance, reports expressions such as “Яка ти красива сьогодні” (Yaka ty krasiva s’ohodni), “Плохо чуєш мене” (Plokho chuiesh mene), “Сама собі празник” (Sama sobi praznik), and “Всьо чьотко” (Vs’o ch’otko), which combine lexical and grammatical elements associated with both Ukrainian and Russian. In “Яка ти красива сьогодні” (Yaka ty krasiva s’ohodni), the Ukrainian syntactic frame co-occurs with the Russian-derived adjective “красива” (krasiva) instead of standard Ukrainian “гарна” (harna). Likewise, “Плохо чуєш мене” (Plokho chuiesh mene) combines the Russian adverb “плохо” (plokho) with the Ukrainian verb “чуєш” (chuiesh) and pronoun “мене” (mene), whereas “Сама собі празник” (Sama sobi praznik) retains a Ukrainian grammatical structure while replacing standard Ukrainian “свято” (sviato) with the Russian-derived noun “празник” (praznik). These examples illustrate recurrent patterns of lexical substitution and morphosyntactic hybridization, demonstrating that Surzhyk is characterized by systematic combinations of elements from both languages rather than arbitrary or sporadic code-switching.

Surzhyk also draws heavily from both Ukrainian and Russian vocabularies, but not in equal or static proportions. In some areas, Russian lexemes dominate, especially for abstract and bureaucratic concepts (e.g., pravitel’sstvo instead of uriad for ‘government’), whereas Ukrainian terms may prevail in domains like food, nature, or kinship. Hentschel (2023) notes that over time, some Surzhyk variants show reduced lexical variation - a sign of emergent stabilization rather than decay.

Phonologically speaking, Surzhyk often exhibits a flattened or neutralized vowel system, with some speakers shifting Ukrainian-specific sounds toward Russian norms, or vice versa. However, this is also highly regionally variable, and in some cases, speakers deliberately exaggerate the phonetic features of one code to index ideological alignment or class positioning (Sokolova, 2023).

In sum, Surzhyk is not just a “chaotic” mixture but a rule-governed, pragmatic adaptation to a bilingual or multilingual environment. It demonstrates both linguistic convergence and social divergence, and therefore, deserves recognition not as a degraded form, but as a functional and meaningful variety.

5. Social Attitudes and Language Ideologies

Surzhyk is not just a linguistic phenomenon; it is a social symbol, a discursive battlefield, and often a source of both shame and solidarity. Its public perception is deeply influenced by ideologies of language purity, class-based stigma, and evolving narratives of national identity. Researches over the past two decades has revealed how the status of Surzhyk fluctuates between stigmatized deviation and reclaimed authenticity, depending on speaker context, political climate, and institutional discourse. These conflicting attitudes often result in discursive tensions - between policy and practice, prescription and lived experience. Shumarova & Shevchenko (2024) demonstrate how different academic and institutional actors create competing narratives about Surzhyk’s legitimacy: one that discredits it as a colonial residue, and another that embraces it as an authentic vernacular. Actually, the ideology of “correct language” has been particularly strong since Ukraine’s independence in 1991. Efforts to establish Ukrainian as the sole state language often positioned Surzhyk as a contaminant - an remnant of colonial subjugation or carelessness. Kostiučenko (2023) notes how this purist discourse intersects with nationalism and modernity, portraying Surzhyk as both backward and unpatriotic.

Historically, Surzhyk has been associated with lack of education, rural background, and political apathy. As Shevchuk Kliuzheva (2023) shows in her sociolinguistic study of bilingual Ukrainian families, many parents actively discourage their children from using Surzhyk, viewing it as a mark of linguistic inferiority. This stigma is reinforced by state-sponsored campaigns emphasizing the purity and standardization of the Ukrainian language - especially in schools, media, and state institutions. However, attitudes toward Surzhyk are far from monolithic. Levchuk (2024) documents a significant generational shift: while older Ukrainians are more likely to perceive Surzhyk negatively, younger speakers - especially in urban and multicultural environments - tend to view it with more pragmatic neutrality or even positive familiarity. Furthermore, in central and southern Ukraine, where hybrid usage is normalized, the stigma is considerably reduced (Palinska, 2023).

Rather than a deficiency, some speakers use Surzhyk as a means of identity signaling - either to highlight regional belonging, downplay elitism, or convey authenticity. For example, politicians or public figures may temporarily shift into Surzhyk-like speech to align with “ordinary people”, a strategy known as indexical accommodation. As Del Gaudio (2023)

emphasizes, Surzhyk functions as a socio-indexical repertoire, rich in symbolic nuance. Moreover, Maxwell, Kudriavtseva, and Skubii (2024) argue that in post-2014 Ukraine, Surzhyk has begun to take on a new semiotic life: it can signal resistance to both Russian domination and Ukrainian linguistic elitism. This ideological revaluation suggests a growing recognition of Surzhyk not as corruption but as creative linguistic agency.

6. Surzhyk in the Context of the Russo-Ukrainian War and Linguistic Decolonization

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and more dramatically after the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, language has become a strategic battlefield in the struggle over national identity, sovereignty, and cultural survival. In this context, Surzhyk has undergone a profound re-evaluation - not only as a sociolect or informal practice but as a symbolically loaded space in the fight for linguistic decolonization.

Russian state propaganda has long claimed that the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine is a monolithic, pro-Russian bloc in need of “protection.” This narrative, which underpinned the ideological justification for military conflict, has been powerfully rejected by the lived realities of Ukrainian citizens - including many who speak Russian, Surzhyk, or both. According to Maxwell, Kudriavtseva, and Skubii (2024), the war has catalyzed a widespread decoupling of language and political loyalty. Speaking Russian or Surzhyk no longer implies support for Russia; instead, these codes are now often used in the service of Ukrainian patriotism and resistance. This phenomenon has important implications for Surzhyk, which previously bore the stigma of being an “improper” form of Ukrainian or a leftover of colonial degradation. The current socio-political moment allows for the reframing of Surzhyk as part of a broader strategy of decolonial resistance, where linguistic hybridity becomes a form of agency.

Rather than seeking total purism or reverting to pre-colonial language standards, many scholars now argue for the recognition of hybrid forms like Surzhyk as legitimate components of Ukraine’s decolonized linguistic ecology. Del Gaudio (2023) and Kostiučenko (2023) advocate for viewing Surzhyk not as a corruption of either language but as a third space - a flexible, adaptive, and culturally resonant means of communication born from historical constraint and creative response. This perspective aligns with broader trends in postcolonial linguistics, where the aim is not to restore a pure linguistic past but to validate present linguistic realities shaped by empire, trauma, and survival. In this view, Surzhyk emerges not as an obstacle to national consolidation but as an authentic expression of the complexity of Ukrainian identity.

Regarding the policy implications, this shift in perception also challenges state-led language policies, that have often emphasized standardization, purity, and monolingual Ukrainian as

goals. While these goals are understandable in light of historical Russification, they may risk alienating millions of Ukrainians whose speech does not conform to normative ideals. As Kuznetsova (2023) warns, failing to recognize the functional legitimacy of Surzhyk could reinforce sociolinguistic exclusion and inadvertently strengthen colonial patterns of linguistic marginalization.

7. Regional and Generational Variation

The use and perception of Surzhyk across Ukraine are shaped by a rich tapestry of geographical, historical, social, and generational factors. Unlike standardized national languages that often benefit from uniform schooling, broadcasting, and policy, Surzhyk is a grassroots phenomenon, deeply tied to the lived experiences of particular regions and cohorts.

One of the most well-documented characteristics of Surzhyk is its high regional variability. According to Hentschel & Taranenko (2022), speakers along the Black Sea coast, particularly in Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Kherson regions, often exhibit Surzhyk forms that are lexically closer to Russian but grammatically more Ukrainianized. In contrast, central Ukraine shows more stabilized hybrid varieties that tend to blend evenly across grammatical and lexical levels (Hentschel, 2023).

These differences are not just linguistic; they also reflect distinct historical legacies. Southern regions, historically more exposed to Russian-speaking military and industrial institutions during the Soviet era, display heavier Russian lexical influence. In contrast, western and central regions, which retained stronger Ukrainian linguistic infrastructure and underwent less Soviet linguistic assimilation, exhibit greater structural integration of Ukrainian in their Surzhyk variants (Khmelevsky & Savchenko, 2000).

Urban–rural dynamics also play a crucial role. In many urban centers, especially those with higher educational access and where Ukrainian is mandated in public service, Surzhyk may be declining in favor of standard Ukrainian or diglossic code-switching. However, in rural and peri-urban areas, Surzhyk often remains the dominant spoken code, used for everyday communication, local governance, and social bonding (Palinska, 2023).

When it comes to different generations, the situation is complex. Levchuk (2024) demonstrates that younger Ukrainians in some regions actively reject Surzhyk as an unwanted remnant of post-Soviet linguistic ambiguity, instead preferring either pure Ukrainian or code-switching between Ukrainian and Russian depending on the situation. However, in other settings, particularly in multilingual families and socially diverse schools, young speakers exhibit practical fluency in Surzhyk, using it selectively for stylistic purposes, irony, or cultural genuineness (Shevchuk Kliuzheva, 2023).

Importantly, many speakers fluidly and consciously switch between linguistic codes depending on the domain, audience and social stakes. As Kuznetsova (2023) notes, Surzhyk is often chosen not out of ignorance, but for pragmatic flexibility - to bridge gaps, defuse tension, or signal in-group belonging. This diversity challenges any monolithic approach to language policy. Policies that ignore regional and generational nuances risk misrepresenting the linguistic reality of the country. Understanding how Surzhyk adapts across time and space is crucial for building inclusive and responsive language planning frameworks that reflect, rather than erase, local speech practices.

8. Surzhyk as a Mixed Code, Mesolect, or Case of Diglossia?

One of the most contentious questions in the study of Surzhyk concerns its linguistic classification. Is Surzhyk a mesolect in a post-diglossic continuum, a mixed language formed through stable blending or simply the result of widespread code-switching and interference in bilingual speech? Scholars remain divided, but the debate sheds light on the structural ambiguity and ideological weight carried by Surzhyk.

Some early interpretations of Surzhyk borrowed from Ferguson's (1959) classical model of diglossia, where Ukrainian and Russian were thought to occupy "High" and "Low" domains respectively. Within this model, Surzhyk was often viewed as an unstable middle - a nonstandard, context-specific mix arising from functional overlaps between the two dominant codes. However, as Sériot (2005) argues, this diglossic model cannot fully explain the variability, creativity, and regional divergence observed in Surzhyk, which often lacks consistent domain separation and involves bidirectional blending rather than simple subordination.

Recent accounts suggest that Surzhyk is best described as a mesolect - a linguistic variety situated between two extremes on post-diglossic spectrum. Within this framework, Surzhyk functions similarly to interlects found in multilingual contact zones, such as Spanglish or Belgrano Portuguól, exhibiting its own logic, emerging norms, and structural coherence. Studies conducted by Hentschel & Palinska (2024) and Kent (2012) present compelling evidence that Surzhyk is neither purely idiosyncratic nor entirely random; rather it displays grammatical tendencies, recurring phonetic patterns, and stabilized forms within specific communities.

Another area of scholarship examines whether Surzhyk should be categorized as a mixed language - a term used in linguistic typology to describe languages that result from deliberate blending of two distinct parent languages (e.g., Michif, Mednyj Aleut). Although Surzhyk does not exhibit the morphosyntactic compartmentalization commonly seen in mixed languages, its persistence across generations, its influence on identity formation, and its stability in certain

contexts indicates that it falls into an intermediate typological category (Del Gaudio, 2023; Hentschel, 2023).

Others argue that Surzhyk is better understood as a form of code-mixing or code-switching, where speakers alternate between Ukrainian and Russian elements for pragmatic or stylistic reasons. However, this position risks underestimating the degree of systematization that Surzhyk has undergone in some regions (Hentschel & Taranenko, 2022), as well as the social and ideological coherence it has come to signify.

Given these debates, many researchers now favor a hybrid conceptual model, recognizing Surzhyk as a multilayered linguistic practice that cannot be neatly subsumed under one category. It is both structural and ideological, rule-bound and variable, stigmatized and reclaimed. Therefore, its classification may not be a matter of fitting it into an existing box, but of challenging the boundaries of typological thinking itself.

9. Computational Recognition of Surzhyk: Towards NLP and Digital Linguistics

As Surzhyk becomes more prominent in public discourse and academic scholarship, new questions are arising about how it should be treated in the realm of digital linguistics, corpus annotation, and natural language processing (NLP). Traditionally marginalized codes like Surzhyk pose a unique challenge to computational models trained on standardized language corpora - but they also provide opportunities for rethinking linguistic representation in the digital age.

Most NLP tools and language-identification systems are trained on clean, monolingual datasets. As a result, they often misclassify Surzhyk texts, labelling them as either Russian or Ukrainian based on lexical density or orthographic conventions. Sira, di Nunzio, and Nosilia (2020) have shown that even the most advanced language detection algorithms have difficulty identifying hybrid language samples, frequently generating incorrect or inconsistent results.

Moreover, annotating Surzhyk presents its own difficulties. Unlike code-switching, which often occurs at sentence or phrase boundaries, Surzhyk involves intrasentential mixing - sometimes at the level of morphemes or affixes. This makes it harder to segment and label in computational terms, especially when speakers apply hybridized morphosyntax that doesn't match any known grammar.

Despite these challenges, significant efforts have been made to develop automatic recognition systems tailored to Surzhyk. Using supervised machine learning and neural network architectures, Sira et al. (2020) trained models to detect mixed-code sequences based on hybrid phonotactics, morphosyntactic irregularities, and contextual usage patterns. Their results indicate that Surzhyk-aware NLP tools are feasible - especially when they trained on authentic, region-specific corpora.

Other projects have started to incorporate social metadata (e.g., speaker age, region, medium) into their models, which enhance accuracy by providing context to language use. These approaches go beyond the traditional assumption of “clean-data” in NLP and towards a model of linguistic complexity that more accurately reflects real-world multilingualism.

The development of Surzhyk-recognizing AI systems carries both technical and ethical implications. Technically, it pushes the boundaries of current NLP frameworks by requiring more flexible, multilingual, and socio-contextual models. Ethically, it raises questions about representation, recognition, and erasure: who has authority to determine which varieties are valid enough to be computationally modeled? Which languages or codes are considered “worthy” of digitization?

By investing in Surzhyk-aware technologies, the Ukrainian digital infrastructure can move toward greater linguistic inclusivity, enabling tools such as spell checkers, auto-captioners, and chatbots to interact meaningfully with hybrid speech forms. In this sense, computational recognition becomes not just a technical achievement but a cultural and political statement.

10. Critical Discussion: Reframing Surzhyk as Agency and Adaptation

Throughout this review, Surzhyk has emerged not as a linguistic failure or relic, but as a dynamic register of negotiation, survival, and resistance. Its persistence - and recent partial rehabilitation - compels us to reconsider common assumptions about linguistic legitimacy, hybridity, and speaker agency.

Many state-sponsored language ideologies still operate within a purist binary, where legitimacy belongs to standardized, monolingual, and officially sanctioned forms. Surzhyk violates this logic. It exists between codes, outside formal instruction, and in defiance of linguistic boundaries. Yet, as Kuznetsova (2023) and Del Gaudio (2023) show, speakers are not passive victims of linguistic collapse. Rather, they use Surzhyk strategically - to bridge cultural divides, reduce social friction, and perform identity in subtle and creative ways. Linguistically speaking, Surzhyk reveals that “impurity” can be rule-governed; socially, it demonstrates that so-called “bad language” is often good at navigating complexity. Politically, its use can index either colonial trauma or postcolonial agency - sometimes both at once. These contradictions make it not a problem to be solved but a phenomenon to be understood on its own terms.

Reframing Surzhyk also involves an ethical reconsideration of who is being heard, which voices are being validated, and whose speech is considered part of the culture. Excluding Surzhyk from language planning, corpus construction, or educational representation result in the exclusion of millions of speakers from the national conversation. As Levchuk (2024) suggests, efforts to delegitimize Surzhyk often lead to internal linguistic colonialism - a process that replicates imperial hierarchies within a postcolonial space. Instead, recognizing Surzhyk

as a legitimate expressive resource allows for pluralism within national identity. It acknowledges the reality of linguistic diversity in Ukraine without requiring uniformity or erasure. By doing so, it also creates room for new linguistic policies - ones that prioritize authentic usage, over idealized norms.

At its core, Surzhyk is about adaptation - to new political realities, new cultural demands, and new communicative needs. It is not the language of the elite, nor the product of planning. It is a language of resilience, born of necessity and shaped by centuries of pressure, yet still alive, evolving, and expressive. As such, Surzhyk deserves not condemnation or nostalgia, but attention, protection, and continued scholarly engagement. It shows us that identity is not fixed but forged in interaction; that linguistic borders are permeable; and that language itself is a terrain of creativity under constraint.

11. Conclusion: Reimagining Surzhyk - A Language of the In-Between

The present review has addressed the four questions posed in the Introduction. First, the examined literature demonstrates that Surzhyk exhibits identifiable morphosyntactic, lexical, and phonological patterns that distinguish it from simple code-switching and support its characterization as a partially stabilized mixed code. Second, social attitudes toward Surzhyk remain diverse and often contradictory, ranging from stigmatization and linguistic purism to increasing acceptance and positive re-evaluation. Third, the development and contemporary meanings of Surzhyk have been profoundly shaped by historical processes of Russification, bilingualism, regional variation, and recent geopolitical transformations. Finally, a growing body of scholarship suggests that Surzhyk may be interpreted not merely as a linguistic by-product of colonial history but also as a potential resource for linguistic decolonization, cultural resilience, and the affirmation of hybrid identities.

Surzhyk, which has long been pushed to the margins of linguistic respectability and national policy, deserves a fundamental reassessment. This review has shown that Surzhyk is not just a corruption of Ukrainian or a remnant of Soviet linguistic imperialism. It is a dynamic, adaptive, and socially embedded phenomenon, shaped by Ukraine's unique historical trajectory and ongoing cultural transformation.

Across seventeen recent academic sources - from structural linguistics and sociolinguistics to language ideology, digital modeling, and postcolonial theory - Surzhyk emerges as a register of hybridity, negotiation, and survival. It is both a response to historical coercion and an expression of contemporary agency. Surzhyk mediates between city and countryside, elite and popular culture, Russian and Ukrainian, modernity and tradition.

By rejecting the purist paradigm, we open the door to recognizing linguistic diversity as a national strength, rather than a weakness. Surzhyk challenges us to think beyond binaries: not

just Ukrainian vs. Russian, but also formal vs. informal, pure vs. hybrid, center vs. periphery. It reminds us that language is not only a system of rules but a practice of life, carried by speakers who are constantly adapting, resisting, and creating.

As Ukraine continues on its decolonial journey, Surzhyk may yet serve as a symbol of resilience - a testament to the ability of language to absorb, transform, and reconstitute itself in the midst of conflict. Recognizing Surzhyk, not as an aberration but as a legitimate part of Ukraine's linguistic ecology, is essential for inclusive nation-building, responsive language policy, and ethical scholarship.

1. The author declares that this article did not receive financial support from any institution,

educational center, or approved research project.

2. The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to this research.

3. The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence was used in writing this article

and that the entire work is their own creation.

4- During the preparation of this work, the author(s) did not use Generative Artificial Intelligence tools.

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