

“You Speak Ukrainian Very Well”. Language Encounters during Ethnographic Fieldwork

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„YOU SPEAK UKRAINIAN VERY WELL” LANGUAGE ENCOUNTERS DURING ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

Most students of anthropology begin their study of the method of ethnography by reading at least part of Bronisław Malinowski’s magisterial *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1981), in which, based on his experience during his field research on the Trobriand Islands, he formulated guidelines and postulates defining a new type of research method in social anthropology. One of the most important aspects of Malinowski’s methodological manifesto was drawing attention to the fact that the language of the studied community is a necessary tool. Malinowski emphasised that ethnographers cannot explore the culture of the studied communities, and especially their “spirit”, without knowing the language of the local people. Thus, the ability to speak the respondents’ language, in addition to long-term field research, became a guiding principle in ethnographic studies. Of course, a great deal has changed since the days of Malinowski’s research and methodological guidance on the subject of what ethnographic fieldwork is and how it should be conducted, as well as how we should treat our fieldworkers (see Amit 2000; Halstead et al. 2008; Okely 2012). What remains unchanged for our method and ethics, however, is a commitment to understanding the world of another group.

Although anthropological reflection in Poland on what the field is and what it means to be in the field is not new (see Buliński & Kairski 2013; *Etnografia...* 2021), I have been unable to find similar Polish examples of in-depth reflections on the linguistic aspects of being in the field. How then are we to understand this ability to speak “the language of natives”? Is language acquired during language courses or philological studies a sufficient tool to help ethnographers during their research? How does using a local language in the field position us, influence our research and the behaviour of our research partners, by initiating, for example, certain situations that may reveal deep structural elements of the social reality under scrutiny? This article explores some answers to these perennial questions. The starting point for this reflection on ethnographic presence in the field, then, is language as encountered through levels of linguistic (in)competence. Drawing on my own research experience, I show that the language that ethnographers must adopt and adapt to in order

to access the field is a tool for communication with fieldwork partners. Importantly, competent contact with a speech community, on their own terms, can be observed to reveal even more. To achieve this, I focus on several highly personal aspects and consequences of my linguistic immersion in the field. As Paweł Ładykowski (2021, p. 235) points out, “Ethnography as a product of research and writing by ethnographers or anthropologists is entirely their own work, i.e. the explanation of social reality from a perspective and using tools that they developed during their academic life and research practice”, but reflections on language use during field research seem to be untheorised in Polish anthropology.

According to Danau Tanu and Laura Dales (2016, pp. 353–354, cf. Moore 2009), although language itself is often the subject of anthropological studies, reflections on the role it plays in the research process are extremely rare, and yet it determines our being in the world of the respondents. Ignoring this aspect in ethnographic self-reflection is a surprising lacuna, because language use remains a vital tool for conducting research. Researchers’ levels of language proficiency not only position them within communities being studied, they also have methodological consequences. However, it continues to be overlooked, as is the use of interpreters in the field, which for some researchers is suspiciously underexplored (Borchgrevink 2003); the reason for this may be a fear of losing the status of anthropological authority. I leave the last word on this matter here to Axel Borchgrevink:

If anthropologists should be unable to learn something as public as the language of the people they study, how could they ever claim to be able to understand the innermost meanings that people attach to things and events, or to discover the hidden mechanisms that make society function, or the secrets hidden from outsiders and casual observers? Clearly, anthropology’s claim to understanding other people and their lives, societies and cultures, could be convincing only if it were based upon mastery of the local language (Borchgrevink 2003, p. 96).

CONTEXTS AND METHODOLOGY

In what follows, I discuss my usage of Ukrainian during my fieldwork through two different observation and research contexts. The first one concerns my research among the Ukrainian minority in Poland. At this point, I have to emphasise that I have lived in this environment for about twenty years. While my interest in this community started from an anthropological curiosity about the world of what I initially and naively considered to be “Others”, Ukrainians from Poland, I am now immersed, linguistically, as an acquaintance, friend, and, for many years, as the husband of a Ukrainian woman. In addition, this role as a husband brings with it other responsibilities now, as a son-in-law and father (for more on the process of entering this community and its consequences, see Kosiek 2019). My presence within this Ukrainian minority, then, is to a large extent that of a recognisable, social person with rights, duties and responsibilities in the community. Having friends and living

in a network of relations formed by this community means, however, that I have the opportunity to observe and record many more behaviours, habits and opinions that are shared by many in the group. Nevertheless, most of my observations are not strictly “academic”, in the sense that they are largely not a consequence of ongoing research projects, coming instead from my personal immersion in the everyday life of the group. What is more, I do not use these observations to create regular *fieldnotes* in my observation log, which I could look up at any time, read and use in my research work. Recorded and remembered situations resulting from my functioning in the Ukrainian community, which I will partially refer to in this article, are closer to *headnotes* (Ottenberg 1990; cf. Okely 2008), that is, fieldnotes stored in the head. These are traces of certain experiences, situations, events or statements I have remembered, which I reach for when necessary. For an anthropologist, *headnotes* are no less important than standard *fieldnotes*, because they often help to interpret *fieldnotes*, although in my case they are recalled in the context of ongoing research work rather than as a reference to (non-existent) *fieldnotes*.

According to colleagues, because I have such an excellent “entry” into the Ukrainian group, I should have been using it to carry out research in cooperation with the group all along. After my first experience with research on mixed marriages in this community (see Kosiek 2008), though, I avoided further projects for years because my immersion in the Ukrainian group and my, sometimes almost uncritical, openness to it was also influencing my personal identity. This change in personal identity was described by one of my ethnological friends as “Ukrainisation”, which he understood as the (full) adoption of a Ukrainian identity. I do not agree with such a characterisation, but undoubtedly the proximity of relationships, including family relationships, with the Ukrainian community did have an impact on my identity, which created an internal block against conducting research *at home*. Several years ago my approach changed a bit in this respect, when I managed to overcome my internal resistance for an oral history project that allowed me to address my reticence and to show myself in the local community as a committed researcher, a friend and a Pole married into the community. Since then, I have not avoided projects focused on the Ukrainian minority in Poland, and I am eager to work on a better understanding of this community, not only through my personal immersion, but also through research projects I am carrying out.¹

The second context from which I draw examples for my analysis comes from research in the Maramureş region, Romania.² The material I use comes from ethnographic field research as a PhD candidate conducted in 2009–2010, which was

¹ Since 2015, I have been working on several projects in Biały Bór, Giżycko and the surrounding area, and now, from 2021, in Przemyśl. In all these towns and cities, the research projects concerned various aspects of the life of the Ukrainian minority in Poland.

² The use of the adjective “Romanian” is related to the fact that in 1303–1919 Maramureş was a Hungarian county, and as a result of the First World War it was divided approximately along the upper Tisa River into the northern part, which is today within the borders of the Ukrainian Transcarpathian Oblast (Transcarpathia), and the southern part of the Romanian county of Maramureş (Magocsi, Pop 2005).

devoted to issues of the identity of the Ukrainian national minority living in this region, where, for almost eight months, I lived in two villages, Repedea, by the Ruscova River, and Remeți, by the Tisa River.³ I have supplemented this PhD material with more recent research from Romania in 2022.⁴ In contrast to my experience of the Ukrainian group in Poland, in the Maramureș Carpathians I conducted ethnographic research (Angrosino 2007), combining participant observation, conversations and unstructured interviews, structured interviews, and desk research. In this case, my immersion in the field did not differ from a typical ethnographic project, and the relationships I built with field partners did not reach such a degree of intimacy as I have managed with the Ukrainian community in Poland.

WAYS OF LEARNING THE UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE

Since the subject of my reflection is the Ukrainian language I use during my research, I give a brief mention of how I learned it. Although my interest in Ukrainian issues began before my ethnology studies in Poznań, I only became interested in the Ukrainian language itself as I developed my research interests, realising that ultimately I would be unable to carry out projects of sufficient quality on Ukrainian topics without being able to use this language. Thus, my efforts to learn Ukrainian began when I was a third-year student of ethnology, attending a Practical Ukrainian Language course at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. At that time, Ukrainian was not completely unfamiliar to me, through my interest in Ukrainian music, but I was far from being able to use it actively. Learning Ukrainian during my third and fourth years of studies did not go well, as I was not systematic, but in the summer of 2006 I went on a two-month fieldwork project in the Eastern Carpathians in Ukraine. Thus, I had little choice but to start actively using Ukrainian. Interacting with speakers of Ukrainian on a daily basis turned out to be the best way for me to start speaking this language, although I still would have made mistakes. After returning from research and starting a scholarship at the Department of Ethnology, Ivan Franko University of L'viv, I heard from L'viv friends that the Ukrainian I used differed from the literary version, and that I spoke like *diad'ko z polonyny*, (“uncle from the valley”), that is, I was “speaking” a Carpathian dialect. As a person who had just started speaking Ukrainian, I was unable to notice such linguistic nuances, but

³ I used findings from this project to prepare my doctoral dissertation, *The “Ukrainian” national minority in the Romanian Maramureș and problems with their identity* (under the supervision of Prof. Aleksander Posern-Zieliński) (Kosiek 2014). The research I refer to here was conducted in 2009–2010 within the framework of a KBN (Research Programme of Committee for Scientific Research) promoter grant (NN109223636).

⁴ From September to December 2022, I was held a scientific internship at the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities in Cluj-Napoca funded by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange. At that time, in September and November, I conducted ethnographic research in villages in the Ruscova river valley.

the language I learned in the valley of the Hnyla brook was quite different from the language spoken on the streets of L'viv. My studies in L'viv and subsequent immersion in the “Ukrainian world” eventually eliminated many early Carpathian accretions, and became, if not close to the literary version of Ukrainian, at least closer to the variant used by the Ukrainian minority in Poland.

This article does not primarily focus on the intricacies of the Ukrainian language. One may note, however, that the complexity of Ukrainian’s many iterations extends beyond the interplay between the standard literary form and regional dialects spoken by indigenous Ukrainian communities in neighbouring countries. Since Ukraine’s independence in 1991, for one thing, the Ukrainian language has undergone various transformations and evolutions. Additionally, the Russian language maintains a significant regional presence in Ukraine, although this presence has more recently diminished as autochthonous Ukrainian communities make language choices in light of the ongoing invasion. Furthermore, the perceived pervasiveness and influence of Russian in Ukraine – in fact Russian has had quite a regionally-bound presence for some time – have been leveraged as propaganda tools to justify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (see Bilaniuk 2005). Finally, indigenous language choices have also had an impact on *surzhyk*, a range of Ukrainian-Russian linguistic blends, the prevalence and representation of which in media, social, and domestic spheres have sparked numerous debates and discussions. Clearly, when referring to the Ukrainian language, it behoves us to tread softly across this fraught linguistic landscape.

UKRAINIAN MINORITY IN POLAND

Before I discuss the Ukrainian language and how I use it when communicating with the Ukrainian minority in Poland, it is worth presenting some basic information about this group from before the outbreak of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

Members of the Ukrainian national minority are today a widely-dispersed community across Poland. The largest populations of Ukrainian origin live in the provinces of northern and western Poland, where almost eight decades ago, during the 1947 “Operation Vistula”, Polish citizens of Ukrainian ethnicity were forcibly deported and dispersed to the “Recovered Territories” that became a part of Poland after World War II. Both this displacement and earlier deportations to the USSR (see Pisuliński 2017) all but eradicated the former, original local communities living in south-eastern Poland.

According to historians, the 1947 deportation was the final event of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict that had begun before the 1940s (see Motyka 2023; Snyder 2003a). It is noteworthy that before the post-war deportations of the Ukrainian population, the ethnic and religious divisions between Poles and Ukrainians in south-eastern Poland were quite fluid (Snyder 2003b). To understand the identity-forming processes in this area in the pre-war period, therefore, the category of national indifference may shed some light (Zahra 2010).

In the years between 1947 and 1952, the deported and dispersed Ukrainian population was subject to an assimilation project planned by the Polish authorities. At that time, the community was not allowed to organise any cultural activities or teach the Ukrainian language, and the dissolution of Greek Catholic Church structures in 1947 also radically disrupted religious practices. Timothy Snyder (2003a) perceives the Polish government's policies of *assimilation* as a strategy aimed at creating a homogeneous nation-state, a culmination of the dreams and plans of Polish political elites from as early as the interwar period. From 1947 to 1989, state propaganda successfully promoted the false claim that all people of Ukrainian descent were collectively responsible for ethnic cleansing in Volhynia and subsequent post-war armed conflicts in south-eastern Poland. Because of this Polish communist propaganda, Ukrainians were labelled *banderowcy* (Banderites) and *rezunicy* (murderers). As a result of the post-deportation breakdown of traditional family and neighbourly ties, and their dispersion and assimilation to the Western Pomeranian Region (the former Prussian territory), the Ukrainian community had to develop new ways to resist and counteract ongoing assimilation processes. In response to these targeted actions, then, many from the Ukrainian community developed strategies to hide their identities, while at the same time opposing the oppressive policies of the Polish state. Other displaced Ukrainians chose to assimilate, trying to blend in with Polish society as quickly as possible in order to survive. Another strategy that enabled the survival of the Ukrainian minority was the acquisition of networking skills among the communities that had been scattered across Poland. These new networks reached far beyond previous family and neighbourly ties. From 1956, cultural events, religious ceremonies and a reviving Ukrainian education system were indispensable in building new types of relationships, eventually even in developing a model of endogamy (see Kosiek 2018).

Over time, local Ukrainians in Poland made the experience of the 1947 deportation a focal point in shaping the social memory of this group, and the experiences of the loss of their "small homelands" and their forced displacement were passed on in families to subsequent generations. Meanwhile, the community began to organise cultural events, including gatherings at schools and anniversary celebrations. After the 1989 democratic transformation in Poland, local Ukrainian communities began to publicly commemorate Operation Vistula (1947) by erecting monuments and crosses, and by placing memorial plaques to the deportations in many locations. Memory and symbolic actions constructed around displacement trauma promoted the myth of the pre-1947 world and its loss (Lehmann 2010; Pactwa 2014; Wangler 2012).

LANGUAGE ENCOUNTERS AMONG PEOPLE FROM THE UKRAINIAN MINORITY IN POLAND

The Ukrainian language is among the more important elements shaping the identity of the Ukrainian national minority in Poland. Keeping this language in daily use in Ukrainian families and communities underpins the conscious effort of

Ukrainians to survive as a distinct group. A study among Ukrainian women conducted by Aleksandra Herman (2019) revealed, for example, that the community's approach to the Ukrainian language has evolved over the seven decades since the displacement. Over this period, however, the command and use of the Ukrainian language has always required making certain choices and having a certain awareness about the meanings of those choices. Conversely, these code-switching strategies also have helped keep a number of choices more explicit for those who choose to speak Ukrainian (Herman 2019, pp. 166–183).

I remember how teenagers from my first entry into the Ukrainian environment (2002–2004) most often communicated with each other in Ukrainian, and when a person who did not know Ukrainian would turn up among the speakers, the young people would switch to Polish. Several of my friends explained to me at the time that this was done out of respect for people who might not understand the conversation, so that they would not feel excluded. Over time, however, when the circle of my acquaintances expanded to include elderly people, I began to hear the word *cwynkajut'*, a term used by fellow Ukrainians to describe members of the community who had assimilated more in Poland. These more integrated Ukrainians felt obliged, due to their origin and given circumstances, to switch more to Polish, albeit imperfectly, which meant leaving tell-tale traces of their Ukrainian identity show in their pronunciation. *Cwynkajut'*, then, is a way of pejoratively judging a specific linguistic behaviour, especially with regards to children and adolescents, for instance with reference to teenagers in Ukrainian school corridors or to those gathering for a church liturgical service. In general, then, this term indicates disapproval and criticism of a linguistic behaviour related to the use of Polish in a situation where Ukrainian should be spoken.

When I returned to Poland from my time in Lviv and the Ukrainian community of Biały Bór, I began a Ukrainian language course. Ukrainian gradually became, at least partially, my second everyday language, a fact that was noticed by local Ukrainian leaders. I remember, for example, how one day, my wife's cousin, a student in the local Taras Shevchenko Secondary School, told me that a teacher had mentioned me while criticising students for their insufficient effort at learning Ukrainian. This teacher had argued that if a Pole could learn and speak Ukrainian, then as young members of the minority, they should make at least the same effort. I did not pay much attention to the story back then. Over the years, though, there have been other situations when my command of Ukrainian was commented upon by people from the Ukrainian community, both in Biały Bór and Sanok, where I have lived for several years and where there is also a minority Ukrainian population. People noticed my Ukrainian and commented on it, and although they never addressed these opinions directly to me, they spoke with some appreciation, and a little envy that, “[these] in-laws are lucky, because although they have a Polish son-in-law, he speaks our language” and “the husband of D., although he is Polish, he knows Ukrainian so well” [personal communications].

Such situations and phrases can be interpreted in three ways. Firstly, they indicate that the command and use of the Ukrainian language was, until recently, a necessary

and valued trait for the Ukrainian community, and certainly remains so for the generations of people who are now in their fifties and older. Using this language at home and in interactions with people from the community was in some ways a must, an element of identity for people of Ukrainian descent. Secondly, undoubtedly in the face of their experience of deportation, the difficulty of assimilating into a new social reality, their resistance to assimilation processes and the pressure of negative stereotypes, a Pole who shows mastery and a willingness to use the Ukrainian language without prejudice is immediately noticed. His behaviour is interpreted as a form of appreciation for Ukrainian culture and language. A Pole who has learned to use Ukrainian displays a lack of prejudice, and thus is quickly noticed as their behaviour is interpreted as showing a kind of valuing of the Ukrainian culture and language. Finally, Ukrainian people's astonishment with a Pole speaking even competent Ukrainian, in my opinion, is fuelled by the fact that Ukrainian has become an imagined feature, identified exclusively with people of Ukrainian descent. A non-Ukrainian, that is, a Pole, who speaks Ukrainian is a surprise to people from the Ukrainian community, as his attitude deviates from the everyday, (negatively-) imagined standard drawn from a set of colonial memories. Moreover, meeting such a person attenuates imagined ethnic boundaries, and the identity of a Ukrainian-speaking Pole may even become less definitively "Other" to a person from the minority. Furthermore, over several years I had many encounters with a group of people with Ukrainian roots, where strangers took me for a person of Ukrainian descent. Moreover, they were quite surprised when it turned out that they were dealing with a person without such a provenance. These kinds of situations did not seem problematic to me until 2018, when I went to Giżycko to do a small oral-history project.

For this research project, I collected eleven biographical interviews with people who, as children or teenagers, were displaced from their hometowns in the south and east of Poland and who now live in Giżycko or in its surrounding villages. In deciding to do this project in a northern Polish Masurian town, I knew I was going to enter a community that was practically alien to me, despite my being a native Pole. A friend who was born and raised in this community and whom I had known for years was able to help me reach older people from the Ukrainian group. This "gatekeeper" arranged meetings with people I wished to interview, and she introduced me as a trusted researcher from Rzeszów who spoke Ukrainian. When meeting my research partner, of course, I introduced myself and also talked about the purpose of my visit. However, knowing who I was visiting, I used the Ukrainian language almost from the moment I crossed the threshold. Having obtained permission to record witness accounts for addition to the archives of the Wrocław Centre for Remembrance and the Future, I proceeded with the interviews. Hours of meetings, stories about a world now gone, covering deportation and growing into a new community; these are all account I cherish in their collection, and materials I will revisit in a professional capacity. Here, however, I discuss a different kind of problem that bothers me to this day and which concerns two of those interviews. After the recording was completed, my research contributor asked me if I was Ukrainian.

Answering truthfully “no”, I noted great surprise in my research partner. Another lady was clearly confused by my answer. Her confusion was so great that a few hours after we parted, she called me asking if I had come to visit her from a borderland (*Kresy*) organisation in Wrocław that was looking for something unknown among the Ukrainian minority. Her questions made me feel uncomfortable and I began to wonder how much that situation, and the concerns of my interlocutor, were brought about by my attitude or behaviour. I concluded that perhaps my fledgling fluency in spoken Ukrainian, as well as the fact that we had met the day before the interview during a service at the local Greek Catholic church, made her believe that I was “the same” as her, that is, a person with Ukrainian roots. But it may be that her concerns were also related to her own life choices. Following retirement, the woman had rediscovered her Ukrainian roots when she got involved in the life of the local Ukrainian community, which implies that the woman may have tried to efface her identity from the local Polish community. Nevertheless, I think that, in the case of both interviewees, my comportment during the meetings meant they mistook me for being Ukrainian, and my consistent and competent use of their language made my identity less clear for them and caused misconceptions. These situations recall observations made by Anna Wylegała (2013) that our fieldwork, our interactions with field partners and its result are to some extent also shaped by our own ethnic origin. My research partner’s surprise at my true origin may also hint at the fact that, if they had been aware that they were talking to a Pole, other things could have been mentioned in their stories, and they would possibly have kept quiet about certain issues.

To summarise, I would like to highlight two aspects. Firstly, the situation when my identity became unclear to my research contributors because I speak Ukrainian gave rise to several ethical concerns. For some time after my experiences in Giżycko, I wondered whether in the future I should inform my interlocutors about my Polish descent. And if so, how should this be done? *Dobryj den’, mene zwaty Tomasz, ja Polak...*⁵ Today I am still not sure that would be the best solution. What I can do is minimise misunderstandings, be honest whenever questions emerge and not pretend to be Ukrainian, which I have never done anyway. Nevertheless, because of my immersion in the Ukrainian community, my life-choices, my knowledge of cultural context and my relationship with people from Ukrainian minorities across Poland, and my proficiency in Ukrainian, my identity may indeed be unclear to my research partners. Perhaps I have already adopted a native-like demeanour, in the sense defined by Barbara Tedlock (1991, pp. 70–71), approaching an almost *bicultural stance* that makes deciphering my identity much harder for my fieldwork partners.

Secondly, a Pole who can easily use Ukrainian is a surprise to people from the Ukrainian minority, as such a character can unwittingly makes it impossible for Ukrainians to establish his or her identity. Secondly, the situation in which a Pole *freely* uses Ukrainian is surprising for Ukrainian minority individuals. In such a case,

⁵ “Good morning, my name is Tomasz and I am Polish.”

those from the Ukrainian community lose the ability to easily recognise the identity of their interlocutor. This situation additionally points to the success in developing Polish and Ukrainian national ideas that have aimed to create a social world composed of ‘pure’ ethnic categories, ideas in part stemming from, respectively, the implementation and impact of ethnic cleansing and deportations. “Fluid” identities present in the history of the Polish-Ukrainian borderland have thus radically diminished. It is poignant, for instance, that I often heard during biographical interviews with ethnic Ukrainians that in the times before the Polish-Ukrainian armed conflict and the two waves of displacements, a Polish neighbour who spoke Ukrainian fluently was a normal thing. Polishness was in the past more determined by religion than by language, which often amounted to celebrating the most important holidays in the Gregorian calendar, in contrast to Ukrainian identity, which remained linked to the Julian calendar. In other words, in the remembered world of south-eastern Poland, the ease of communication, even bilingualism, that existed in relations between neighbours who were assigned to different ethnic categories was nothing exceptional. However, after more than seven decades, for the same people who remember the lost world, and for their descendants, Ukrainian-speaking Polish neighbours have become such a rare thing that their identification may have become problematic.

LANGUAGE ENCOUNTERS IN MARAMUREȘ

Quite a number of villages in the valleys of the Ruscova, Vișeu and Tisa rivers in the Romanian Marmaros bordering Ukraine are populated by a Slavic-speaking people, usually identified by most researchers, as well as by Romanian legislation, as a Ukrainian minority from Romania (Leno 2010). The issue of the ethnic identity of this community is arguably more complex, but it is not the subject of consideration in this article (see Kosiek 2020). However, records of Slavic-speaking people living in this area date back to at least the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries (Pavlúk & Robčuk 2003, p. 19). The identity-forming processes that affected this group were clearly different from the experience of the Ukrainian population from Poland, but until the end of World War I, the communities of Marmaros that I researched were subject to processes similar to those in the area of today’s Zakarpattia Oblast in Ukraine (see Magocsi 2021, pp. 61–122).

According to Ukrainian linguists, the Slavic-speaking community of Romanian Marmaros uses distinct Ukrainian dialects (Pavlúk & Robčuk 2003). Regional Transcarpathian dialects are used in most villages, while local Hutsul dialects are used in the villages of the Vișeu valley (*ibid.*, pp. 23–24). Mykola Pavlúk and Ivan Robčuk (2003) also emphasise that in Marmaros, as with the Ukrainian population from other regions of Romania, use of the literary version of the Ukrainian language never spread as widely, which has been interpreted as a consequence of poor Ukrainian education in local schools (*ibid.*, p. 10). However, it should be kept in mind that the Ukrainian language was indeed taught in these schools, including under communism.

Moreover, in the first decades after World War II, there were even secondary schools with Ukrainian as the language of instruction in Sighetu Marmăției by the Tisa river (Pavliuk & Zhukovsky 1993, p. 306). Thus, there may well be other reasons for the unpopularity of the literary version of the Ukrainian language.

After completing my research and analysing my fieldnotes, I realised that both my perception and understanding of Maramureș were largely determined by my comprehension of the languages I encountered during my fieldwork. The common languages used by researcher and field partners were the milieux through which I made observations and interpreted the features with the identity of the studied community. Moreover, I believe that if I had had to research through Romanian, my interpretations might have been significantly different. The fact that during my Romanian fieldwork I used the literary version of Ukrainian – or as close as I could manage – strongly influenced my experience in the field, as well as my subsequent analysis of the ethnographic research.

I distinctly remember my first field trip in Marmaros in autumn 2008, where I made my first contact and established where I would start the project. Approaching the Ruscova valley, I gave a lift to a hitchhiker, and we soon started speaking Ukrainian together. As our Ukrainian conversation continued, I drove him to the house of a friend of his where he made an introduction that allowed me to stay for several nights. This first field experience created a recurring point of contact, from which I would develop important field relationships with several people living in Repedeș at the time. The entire initial episode allowed me to believe, erroneously as it turned out, that I would not need to learn Romanian, as our communication in Ukrainian had been so easy. Thus I assumed, equally wrongly, that Ukrainian would be sufficient to conduct my research.

I returned to Marmaros a few months later, brimming with confidence. However, as soon as I left the circle of my hosts' closest friends from Repedeș, it became clear that the local spoken language differed so greatly from my literary version of Ukrainian that I experienced many mutual misunderstandings with local people. Unfortunately, then, my first language encounters in autumn 2008 disappointed me greatly. During the course of research, I learned that my hosts had graduated from a Ukrainian university in the 1990s, and for this reason our communication in Ukrainian had been unproblematic. Interestingly, even at this home of two teachers educated in Ukraine, Ukrainian was used only in conversations with me. When my hosts had their relatives or neighbours visiting, however, those gathered used only the local language.

Over time, of course, my capacity to function in the local language from the Ruscová valley improved, but right until the end of my research in 2010, my research contributors sometimes had problems understanding what I was saying. This was the case both with young people, who were learning the literary language at school as part of Ukrainian language courses, and with older people. One time, in the mountain hamlet of Bardea, in Poienile de Sub Munte, to take an example, as I was strolling between buildings with Vasyl one of my field partners, we met a man who

was in his sixties or seventies. My questions to him were posed in literary Ukrainian and were translated into the local language by Vasyl, even though I understood the interlocutor's answers well enough that I did not need explanations. He, however, did not understand me; I could progress only so far in the time I had in the region.

In contrast to my experiences with using the Ukrainian language in interactions and research on the Ukrainian minority in Poland, in the context of Maramureş, my Ukrainian has always been something that clearly emphasised my strangeness and outsider status. The locals in Maramureş sometimes took me for a Ukrainian, but one from Ukraine proper, never one of their own, i.e. not a person from a Ukrainian village in northern Romania. I suspect this was because in everyday life, apart from Ukrainian lessons at school, practically no one uses the Ukrainian literary version there. Some of my research contributors even defined the literary variant as “foreign” or “incomprehensible”. During my autumn 2022 research, I was told that if a local person tried to use the literary version of Ukrainian in an everyday situation, their peers would think that they were either having a joke and wanted to tease them, or that they were trying to exalt themselves at the expense of those peers. When finishing my project at the end of 2010, I had a chance to say goodbye to my hostess from Repedeá, a Ukrainian language teacher at the local school, and I heard that she was happy that I had lived with them for so many months, so that her daughter could get used to Ukrainian!

I did not learn Romanian well enough to conduct research in this language. My linguistic incompetence also became a factor in initiating certain situations during my research. One situation concerned my participation in Pentecostals and Seventh Day Adventist prayer meetings in the Protestant communities of Repedeá and Remeţi. In Repedeá, after an earlier meeting with the local Pentecostal presbyter, I was invited by him to participate in a prayer meeting. I gladly accepted his invitation, as I was curious about this religion, but I also wanted to know more about how they prayed, whether for instance they only used Romanian when praying, which I had previously heard from other local Ukrainians activists. During the service, it turned out that the vast majority of prayers and songs were not in Romanian, but in the local speech. Although this experience initially indicated that the Ukrainian community leaders had been wrong, a few days later, a respondent told me “*my mother had not sung as much in Rus’ky as she did during the last service*”, the one I myself had attended.⁶ Thus, perhaps it was my presence, as a person who did not know Romanian, that *created a choice* for the congregation to sing Rus’ky songs and recite Rus’ky prayers, a choice they would not otherwise have made. Rus’ky was a language which, according to my respondent, was only sparsely used during prayer meetings. Thus respondents were accommodating me and in doing so, inadvertently diminishing the value of my time among them.

⁶ *Rusyn (Ruthenian)* – this is a category used by many local residents to self-define or name the local speech. This category has nothing to do with Russianness. It is rather a term that has been used since before the emergence of the category *Ukrainian*.

Undoubtedly, researchers having limited command of the languages used by their field partners sometimes has interesting consequences (cf. Winchatz 2006). In my research in Maramores, my rudimentary knowledge of Romanian was a factor in my lack of attention to the regular use of the term *corcitură* in statements from my research partners. This word in Romanian means “mongrel”, and my partners used it to name their local speech and identity. Although I noted the term at the time, it remained on the periphery of my analytic awareness as I wrote my doctoral dissertation. Only with time did I realise that it might be more important, a local sign of national indifferentism, or a form of *anational* identity, as suggested by Agnieszka Halemba (2015), terms indicating that possessing an ethnic or national identity is not necessarily fundamental to one’s sense of self. Researchers of nationalism, when considering these terms, highlight the existence of groups that remain detached from nationalistic endeavours (Van Ginderachter & Fox 2019), often challenging the chauvinistic policies of nation-states through certain actions and perspectives. One notable aspect of indifferentism, for instance, is the use of terms that do not neatly fit within the ethnic and national classifications endorsed or promoted by nation-states. Categories such as *tutejsi* (the people from here) (Labbé 2019) *mieszany* (mixed, a term prevalent in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland until the 1940s deportations), or *corcitură* (which I encountered in my research on Romania and remains in use) can be viewed, among other attitudes and behaviours, as expressions of national indifferentism or *anational* identity.

* * *

“You speak Ukrainian very well” are words that I have heard many times from people of Ukrainian descent, both during fieldwork and in everyday interactions. To hear this, as a person who is in daily interactions with my interlocutors, is flattering of course. But as an anthropologist, I sense there are many much more important reflections that come with it, related to my being in the field and not being a Ukrainian myself. These words communicate just that and, as in “thick description” (Geertz 1973), these words are associated with a wide of aspects of functioning in a group and being in the field. Acts of identification and ideas about the addressee of this statement are among them.

Undoubtedly, fluency in the language of a local community is extremely helpful, even crucial, during fieldwork. Command of the language used by the people among whom we research creates not only an opportunity for communication, informal conversations, or interviews, but is also an important aspect of our being ethnographers in the field. Language helps in building rapport with our interlocutors that goes beyond mere communication as information-gathering; it leads so often to a meaningful exchange in our attempts to better understand our world. Reflexivity about our linguistic presence in the social environment of our research seems to be no less important than entanglements in the ethnographic field caused by emotional and identity-related issues (see Stanisiz 2011). For me, this aspect of fieldwork experience is certainly essential, and in the context of my research in Romania and

my everyday functioning in the Ukrainian community in Poland, has different and important manifestations that continue to unfold as I move deeper into both fieldsites.

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„YOU SPEAK UKRAINIAN VERY WELL”
LANGUAGE ENCOUNTERS DURING ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

Key words: Ukrainian minority, Poland, Romania, language, Ukrainian, fieldwork, methodology

Some students of anthropology must be familiar with passages from Bronisław Malinowski's work (1981), in which, based on his personal field experience gained in the Trobriand Islands, he formulated guidelines and postulates defining a new type of research method in social anthropology. One of the most important aspects of Malinowski's methodological manifesto was drawing attention to the fact that the language of the studied community is a necessary tool. Malinowski strongly emphasised that ethnographers cannot explore the culture of the studied communities, and especially their "spirit", without knowing the language of the local people. Thus, the ability to speak the respondents' language, in addition to long-term research, became a rubric for ethnographic studies. In this article, the starting point for the reflection on ethnographic presence in the field is the language and the ethnographer's level of linguistic (in)competence. Using my own research experience as an example, I show that the language of locals spoken by ethnographers is not only a tool for communication with fieldwork partners, but also that the very use of this language and the level of its competence or the use of its specific variants can become, if ethnographic reflexivity is maintained, the subject of observation and reflection, revealing selected aspects of the explored community and its culture.

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