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Growing up in a Ukrainian Bilingual Community: Families' Daily Practices and Educational Environment

Abstract

The article analyses the language situation in Ukraine before the beginning of Russian military aggression in February 2022. The data reflect the language practices of Kyiv families with preschool age children. The sociolinguistic study shows the use of different languages, primarily Ukrainian and Russian, in families raising children of this age group. The author traced the correlation between parents' language behaviour and children's language practices. This article examines bilingualism in the context of the daily language practices of children and families. The author pays attention to the sociolinguistic aspects of the Ukrainian language used in the formal and non-formal communication of Kyiv's preschool children.

Keywords: bilingualism; family language policy; bilingual parenting; language practices; mother tongue; first language; second language

1 Background

The Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has triggered one of the biggest migration crises in Europe in recent decades. Millions of Ukrainian citizens have temporary protection in the European Union. Ukrainian child refugees are being educated in host countries. Appropriate linguistic and cultural adaptation and integration into new communities, particularly in the educational environment, require an understanding of the sociolinguistic specifics of language practices typical for Ukrainian families before the war.

Academic literature identifies individual bi- and multilingualism, which depend on particular language users and various life situations. Another factor at play is the social context in which the individual functions, including the socio-political situation that affects the acquisition of another language / other languages. The language situation in Ukraine has been complicated ever since the country gained independence. Different forms of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism are typical for adults and children. Many sociolinguistic aspects of mass bilingualism in Ukraine have been described and studied in detail.

Larysa Masenko has been researching the sociolinguistic issues of Ukraine for many years. Her publications “*Суржик: між мовою і язиком*” (Masenko, 2011) and *Мовна ситуація Києва: День сьогоднішній та прийдеишній* (Masenko, 2001) present theoretical issues concerning the language situation and mass bilingualism in Ukraine. Participation in the INTAS project (2006–2008), under the supervision of Julia Besters-Dilger (Besters-Dil'ger, 2008), may be regarded as research work, as Masenko presents the position of Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism and surzhyk based on fieldwork.

A great deal of important sociolinguistic issues in the context of multilingualism have been studied by the Polish scholar Paweł Levchuk. One study that must be considered is that of the

trilingualism of Ukrainians living in Poland and Ukraine (Levchuk, 2015, 2019, 2020), in which the author presents interesting data about proficiency levels and frequency of language use in Polish–Ukrainian bilingualism.

Today the issue of children’s speech development and bilingual practices needs to be a better-studied aspect of Ukrainian linguistics. Several researchers have raised questions about quantitative data on the use of languages in education. This paper considers the work of Oksana Danylevska and Larysa Zasekina (Danylevs’ka, 2013; Zasiakina, 2007). O. Danylevska partially analyses the language situation in Ukrainian schools. Her works describe the patterns of language behaviour of Kyiv schoolchildren in a bilingual environment. L. Zasekina presents ideas on developing Ukrainian schoolchildren’s linguistic personality in the psycholinguistic aspect. Larysa Kazantseva studied some specific features of Ukrainian children’s speech development in multilingualism (Kazantseva, 2014).

The Family Language Policy concept is missing in Ukrainian linguistic discussion. The author of this article made the first attempt to comprehend the components of family language policy for understanding the language situation and language behaviour of children (Shevchuk-Kliuzheva, 2022). The author also presented the language situation in Ukraine and its influence on the language competence of Ukrainian children in a comprehensive study of the sociolinguistic situation of Ukrainian families published in 2020 (Shevchuk-Kliuzheva, 2020).

It is necessary to study in detail the issue of raising children in the conditions of mass Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism and the acquisition of code-switching skills in early childhood. Special attention should also be paid to the specifics of the socialization of Ukrainian children in a bilingual situation and their acquisition of the second language in these conditions. It is therefore essential to study mass bilingualism based on the description of the components of family language policy, in particular, the daily language practices of families in which children are growing up.

2 The State of Research and Methodology

There has been a shift in family language policy studies from a traditional parent-centred approach to a family-centred one in the last several years. Researchers have been involving children in their studies and empowering them to share their ideas on what a successful family language policy means (Wilson, 2019, 2020).

This article focuses on the concept of family language policy, which has been explained in linguistics (Smith-Christmas, 2016; Spolsky, 2004, 2009). The language situation in Ukraine from the perspective of children’s communication, especially in Kyiv, should be analysed by components of family language policy. Following Bernard Spolsky (2004), this study focuses on language policy components such as language ideologies, language practices, and language management.

The Ukrainian education system avoids specific actions and methodological recommendations for working with Ukrainian–Russian bilingual children. Educational institutions do not specify the form of bilingualism of Ukrainian children of any age. Additionally, the proficiency and communicative activity of contact languages in children’s bilingualism still need to be determined. Ukrainian legislation provides for the priority position of Ukrainian as the state language, but the communicative power of the Russian contact language is relatively high. The speech features of Ukrainians are influenced by the frequent use of two related languages in one environment, code-switching, and code-mixing. Children’s speech requires special scientific attention because this speech develops in mass bilingualism through natural language acquisition in communication with native speakers. Children’s speech in Ukraine is a marker of the communicative activity of using a contact language. It shows the acquisition of language(s) in the family and/or during socialization in the educational environment. Like other priority spheres for the state, Ukrainian education is clearly regulated in the learning and use of the state and other languages in official communication. However, in non-formal communication, children use the most convenient language practices for themselves. The Law of Ukraine “On Preschool Education” (2001) and the

Basic Component of Preschool Education in Ukraine, which is the State Standard of Preschool Education in Ukraine (2021) contain standard requirements for preschool education. These documents define the content and scope of knowledge, skills, and abilities that Ukrainian pre-schoolers should acquire. The State Standard of Preschool Education describes the critical competencies of the child and focuses on language competence. This competence includes fluency in the state language and the child's mother tongue, if it is different. Unfortunately, state documents and linguistic studies do not clearly define the basic concepts of language policy. The Ukrainian educational system does not describe clear criteria that should be used to define the concept of mother tongue in the context of bilingualism and multilingualism.

Mass bilingualism is unacceptable to the state language policy. The crucial point for the development of early childhood bilingualism is the concept of primary (direct, family environment) and secondary (indirect, educational environment) communities and the change in their priority for the child. Family language practices and family language ideology should consider the complicated issues of children's socialization in the Ukrainian educational environment. This environment includes children with different family practices, particularly Russian-speaking and bilingual. It may not be easy if parents want their child to grow up as a monolingual with Ukrainian as the home language. The child will probably begin to spontaneously acquire Russian due to contact with other children who are native Russian speakers. Acquiring another language is absolutely standard for bilingualism as a social phenomenon. The Polish scholar Władysław Miodunka draws attention to bilingualism as a social phenomenon: "In general, the concept of bilingualism is understood as a language situation in which speakers interchangeably use two different languages depending on the environment or setting. It is, therefore, the most common case of multilingualism" (Miodunka, 2003). He notes that bilingualism includes "a set of linguistic, psychological and social problems faced by speakers who in one part of their communication have to use a language that is not accepted outside the group [their group], and in another part – an official language or a language that is generally accepted" (Miodunka, 2003).

The political aspect of the language issue since Ukraine gained independence has created difficulties in the perception of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism in Ukrainian children. Mastering the Russian language in socialization is only sometimes desirable for Ukrainian monolingual families. The reason is that parents want to raise their children as Ukrainian monolinguals in the home environment (home language). The communicative activity of the Russian language makes most Ukrainian children bilingual, regardless of the wishes of parents or children. The quantitative data on the use of Russian by children in Kyiv will be presented in more detail below. The manner of language acquisition influences the importance of the language environment for the child's speech competence as a priority development factor. Followers of the functional-constructivist approach prioritize the environment and social factors that determine the child's language development. Followers of the generative approach with universal grammar and 'built-in' devices in the brain focus on personal indicators of language acquisition. These approaches have logical reasoning. It is essential to mention that the most effective language acquisition is in the communication process with native speakers, not just learning. The language environment where a child develops their language skills is almost crucial (Smith-Christmas, 2016).

This article uses data collection and analysis methods, particularly statistical methods of linguistic research. The specificity of the language situation in children's communities is shown in the data of the sociolinguistic survey. The article presents data from a survey of Ukrainian families raising preschool children. The survey was conducted in January 2022 via the Internet to provide data on the main tool of children's communication. The survey was conducted in the city of Kyiv and was organized by the Department of Education and Science of the Kyiv City State Administration. The questionnaire was distributed among families in which children study in municipal preschool educational institutions in Kyiv. The questionnaire contains six questions and provides a general idea of the correlation between Ukrainian and Russian in family communication between parents and children. The survey involved 20,588 respondents. These data help to understand the use of languages in the family to describe children's language practices

in the context of early bilingualism. The article deals with the issue of using the concept of ‘mother tongue’ in Ukrainian linguistics, paying attention to the criteria for determining the mother tongue in Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism. This article aims to study the language experience of families with preschool children.

3 Results

Sociolinguistic data help to identify trends in the language development of Ukrainian children, in particular pre-schoolers undergoing the socialization process. Adult family members self-identified their speech behaviour and the speech behaviour of children growing up in the family. Analysis of the family language policy should characterize its essential component, namely the language of family communication and the child’s mother tongue. Home language and mother tongue determine the family’s conscious and subconscious language ideology (Spolsky, 2004).

The survey “Ukrainian language from preschool age” (January 2022) shows that Ukrainian is the language of family communication at home for 37% of respondents and Russian – for 32% of respondents. 26.7% of respondents defined their families as bilingual, as their family’s language depends on the conditions of communication and can vary (see Table 1).

Table 1. “What language do you use at home?” (the survey “Ukrainian language from preschool age”, 2022).

What language do you use at home?	
Ukrainian language	37%
Russian language	32%
It depends on the situation (Ukrainian and Russian)	26,7%
Another option	4.3%
20 562 respondents, own research	

This question shows the actual language situation in families in which preschool children are growing up and studying in the preschool educational institutions of Kyiv. The number of respondents who chose Russian as the language of family communication and those who identified Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism as a family practice together is 58.7%. These data indicate that most respondents (and their families) who took part in the survey are bilingual. Two closely related languages perform the most critical functions for respondents – communicative and cognitive. These quantitative data on bilingual practices in Ukrainian families in which children are growing up will influence the situation between children from different families, as they realize family experiences outside the home. Bilingual children with Russian as the dominant language use Russian in some specific situations in preschools, especially during games in informal and unregulated communication with peers. The children of the 37% of families with Ukrainian as a home language will acquire Russian by being in language groups with children who use Russian as the dominant language.

Bilingual practices in families trigger the switching of language codes in different communicative situations. Switching codes is evidence of bilingual activity. Children in families with such language practices develop early active bilingualism between closely related languages. Code-switching is highly associated with parents’ abilities in each language, as well as the sociolinguistic environment of the family (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). Code-switching can lead to language mixing. This is especially relevant because of the early age of the children in question. In most cases, they will go through a phase of language mixing of variable intensity. Some children manage the situation of language mixing comfortably, especially if the family language policy

stimulates the choice of language use. The age specifics of early bilingualism influence the speech codes acquired by the child. Bilingual children may have a hybridization of lexemes and syntactic constructions because they have a limited vocabulary, which they sometimes acquire from another language. Children are characterized by an underdeveloped grammatical system and lack of comprehension of grammatical forms and categories (King & Fogle, 2006). The linguistic mechanisms of Ukrainian–Russian hybridization of lexemes in the speech of Ukrainian children require more study.

In bilingualism there is an interaction of languages which differ in their status in society and role for speakers. Languages differ in their status as first language, second language, mother tongue, and foreign language. First and second languages are distinguished by the time and order of their acquisition or by belonging to a particular society. Scholars believe that there is no direct correlation between the first and native language, on the one hand, and between the second and foreign languages, on the other hand. The concepts of ‘first language’ and ‘mother tongue’ are often used as synonyms.

The difficulty of determining the mother tongue in bilingual and multilingual situations constantly attracts researchers. In one of the most recent studies on the regional specificity of the linguistic situation on the Black Sea coast of Ukraine, scholars Gerd Hentschel and Olesya Palinska provided data that show Ukrainian respondents as speakers of not only two first languages, but three (Hentschel & Palinska, 2022). The situation in which three codes – Ukrainian, Russian and Surzhyk (Ukrainian–Russian mixed code) can be defined by the respondents as the first language according to the criterion ‘felt mother-tongue’, requires more detailed consideration in the context of language practices in Ukrainian bilingual families with preschool children.

Standard definitions of the concept of ‘mother tongue’ in Ukrainian linguistics need to be considered in more detail in the context of this article. In the *Енциклопедія «Українська мова»* the term mother tongue is defined as the language with which a person enters the world and joins the traditions of their national origin (Rusanivskyi et al., 2007). The authors of the dictionary article highlight the priority of language acquisition, while other factors are not taken into consideration. *Короткий словник лінгвістичних термінів* gives another definition of mother tongue, which also highlights the priority of language acquisition: it is the first language spoken by the child (the language of the parents), or the language with which the individual has entered the culture during his or her conscious life (Yermolenko et al. 2001). The second part of this definition needs to be clarified with regard to the stages of language acquisition. The authors believe that the criterion of priority of acquisition correlates with its importance for the speaker, breaking the definition’s previous logic. Uriel Weinreich considers (Weinreich, 1968) that the priority of learning the mother tongue should not be questioned in any case. The language is either acquired as the first and mother tongue, or it is not. Such acquisition cannot come in adulthood, due to the consciousness of the importance of the first and mother tongue. Władysław Miodunka (2003) wrote about the importance of the first language and the role of language in shaping one’s worldview, as well as the fact that it is the mother tongue that seems logical, natural, and easy to the native speaker. This study will use the concept of mother tongue as the first (L1) language because of its priority in life and will be contrasted with the concept of the second language (L2) in the order of its acquisition.

An essential issue for understanding family language policy is the question of the child’s mother tongue. The survey data show the child’s central or functional-first language, i.e., the language the child uses in family communication at home. Ukrainian is the first language (as defined by parents) for 36.6% of children, Russian – for 47.3% of children, and almost 8.2% of respondents chose the option ‘Ukrainian and Russian’ (see Table 2).

Groups of children have different communicative situations during formal and informal communication. Children may be in an environment that differs from their everyday language practices in the family, mainly those children that have Russian as their first language (47.3%). We should define these children as bilinguals since, as noted earlier, “the language of preschool education is the state language” (Law of Ukraine on Preschool Education, Article 10, paragraph 1), i.e.,

Table 2. “What language does your child speak?” (the survey “Ukrainian language from preschool age”, 2022).

What language does your child speak?	
Ukrainian language	36.6%
Russian language	47.3%
Ukrainian and Russian languages	8.2%
Another option	7.9%
20 424 respondents, own research	

the entire educational process in preschool is in Ukrainian. The survey of parents shows that the legislation on Ukrainian as the language of education is working. The question about the language of preschool teachers confirms this fact (see Table 3).

Table 3. “Does the preschool teacher speak Ukrainian with the children?” (the survey “Ukrainian language from preschool age”, 2022).

Does the preschool teacher speak Ukrainian with the children?	
Yes	97.6%
No	0.7%
Another option	1.7%
20 460 respondents, own research	

These data indicate that Kyiv pre-schoolers with Russian as their first language will master Ukrainian both through learning and through contact with native Ukrainian speakers. In this case, Ukrainian becomes the second language for children with Russian as their first language. Polish researcher Ewa Lipinska states that a second language is acquired in the natural environment where this language is used. An important point to which the scholar draws attention is the ‘target language’, i.e. the language most appropriate in order to function comfortably in new conditions (in our case, education). In fact, ‘target language’ includes the content of the concepts of ‘foreign language’ and ‘second language’, but it has a more comprehensive meaning (Lipińska, 2003). Children acquire a second language naturally and easily (second language acquisition) because it becomes functionally the first language – the language of education, communication with peers, and their general surroundings (Ellis, 1994). Children with Russian as their functional-first language are the majority among Kyiv pre-schoolers, so it can be assumed that children with Ukrainian as their first language acquire Russian in the process of socialization. Ukrainian monolinguals become Ukrainian–Russian bilinguals with Russian as the second language because they acquire Russian in contact with native speakers. The active use of Russian in the everyday practices of Kyiv families stimulates and supports the communicative activity of two related languages among children. Children with Russian as their first language may have a high level of speech competence in Ukrainian because of the early acquisition of Ukrainian as a second language in preschool and through systematic learning. However, the acquisition of Russian as a second language by some preschool children with Ukrainian as their first language is not perceived so clearly. Firstly, there are other tasks in preschool education in Ukraine. Secondly, an insufficient level of the mastery of Russian as a second language, and the similarity of the two languages, results in mistakes in one language under the influence of the other and code-mixing.

In the context of the non-formal but active bilingualism characterized above, attention should be paid to the quantity and quality of exposure children receive to different languages. Researchers

support the idea that high-quality bilingual language development is crucial (Marchman et al., 2010; Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2017). It is not easy to determine exactly what combination of quantity and quality is required. Nonetheless, some studies estimate that children need a minimum of 10–25% of overall language exposure to a language to achieve fluency, which will only occur if their language experience is rich and varied (e.g., Place & Hoff, 2011). If children do not receive sufficient high-quality bilingual exposure, they are unlikely to become proficient in all their languages. One mechanism to support high-quality bilingual interactions is to promote shared book-reading practices at home in the family’s multiple languages. Practices such as shared book reading, where an adult reads to a child, can also benefit bilingual language acquisition (e.g., Tsybina & Eriks-Brophy, 2010). However, some research suggests that families may tend to emphasize one language over the other in their home literacy practices, leading to unbalanced exposure to each child’s languages (Gonzalez-Barrero et al., 2021). Sharing the view that it is essential to balance the bilingual input, I would like to draw attention to parents’ answers about reading Ukrainian-language books to their children.

Table 4. “How often do you read Ukrainian books to your child?” (the survey “Ukrainian language from preschool age”, 2022).

How often do you read Ukrainian books to your child?	
Every day	44.9%
Once a week	33.2%
I don't read	9.3%
Another option	12.6%
20 467 respondents, own research	

It is clear that daily family reading practices favour the quality of exposure in a bilingual situation and can help balance bilingualism. When comparing respondents’ answers about the functional-first language used by their child with Ukrainian-language reading, it is necessary to consider the following data in more detail (see Table 5): for children with Russian as their first language (47.3%, see Table 2), the practice of daily reading books in Ukrainian is typical for only 14.3%. These data show that parents of children growing up in bilingual environments do not actively use reading to balance bilingual language practices. Daily reading in Ukrainian is a more common activity for children with Ukrainian as their first language: Ukrainian as their first language (36.6%, see Table 2) and daily reading in Ukrainian – 25.2% of 44.9%, respectively.

Table 5. “Daily reading in Ukrainian. Comparison of children with Ukrainian as the first language and Russian as the first language” (the survey “Ukrainian language from preschool age”, 2022).

Daily reading in Ukrainian: Comparison of children with Ukrainian as the first language and Russian as the first language			
Ukrainian as a first language (Table 2)	36.6%	Daily reading in Ukrainian (Table 4)	25.2% of 44.9%
Russian as a first language (Table 2)	47.3%	Daily reading in Ukrainian (Table 4)	14.3% of 44.9%
20 467 respondents, own research			

From this data, which demonstrates the correlation between a child’s first language and daily reading in Ukrainian, it can be seen that most families in which children’s first language is functionally Russian do not actively use shared book-reading practices of bilingual education. Different

families approach bilingualism in different ways. Some caregivers speak only one language to their child (the ‘one-person-one-language approach’). In others, caregivers speak more than one language to the child and even a third one between them (Orena et al., 2020). Caregivers in-home language families (i.e. families who speak a language other than the one(s) of the wider community) may use only the home language in the home and employ the community language(s) outside the home (Ballinger et al., 2020). To better understand the situation in Ukrainian bilingual families concerning bilingual education methods, more detailed surveys are needed, including the functioning conditions of the communicative acts in which children participate. However, it is already possible to say that those Ukrainian families who are bilingual and actively use Russian as their home language prefer to preserve it as their family language. At the same time, they do not try to balance bilingual family communication, particularly by using shared book-reading practices in Ukrainian. Most likely, Ukrainian families with Russian as a home language, and functional-first language for children, consider that the official Ukrainian-language sociocultural environment (educational institutions) will positively impact their proficiency in Ukrainian. Thus, families with bilingual practices and a preference for Russian as a home language use the family as a source of language experience in one of the languages, specifically Russian, hoping that when children enter day-care, preschool or school, peers and the academic environment will increasingly impact their children’s language abilities in the official community language.

It is important to pay special attention to an issue that has been removed from Ukrainian academic discourse due to politicization: the issue of children growing up with two first languages in a situation of mass Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism. The simultaneous acquisition of two (or more) languages requires special attention when considering the formation of early bilingualism, which is reflected in Table 2 at 8.2%. This is the percent of children whose parents chose Ukrainian and Russian as the primary communication tool in everyday family practices. There is an evident tradition in the scientific literature on this issue. Scholars qualify this situation of early language development as a case of bilingual first language development (2L1) (De Houwer, 1990). Bilingual children in such conditions go to the same stages of development as monolingual children while distinguishing between the language systems. What helps children to master two languages as one (2L1) is the human capacity for the acquisition of languages, which is the key to multilingualism. Children’s ability to understand linguistic features that allow them to comprehend language and process it based on phonological, semantic, and syntactic relations is one of the cognitive abilities to understand human speech. The situation is unclear when two or more languages are acquired sequentially instead of simultaneously. The scientific literature describing the research shows very different situations of language acquisition. It is not easy to summarize in a few words the long debate about the similarities and differences between first (L1) and second (L2) sequential bilingualism acquisition. Most researchers consider the age of the child as a crucial factor. With regard to the simultaneous acquisition of more than one language (L1 and 2L1), some scholars set a strict time frame of the first months of life (De Houwer, 1990). Other researchers choose a more flexible option of three to four years (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2002). It is claimed by some that we can talk about simultaneous language acquisition up to the age of 10, as later such language practices are referred to as adult second language acquisition (L2) (Filipović & Hawkins, 2019). Researchers consider that it is worth talking about two first languages and even about the bilingual acquisition of the first language (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2002). The main factors behind the simultaneous acquisition of two languages are the manner of bilingual development and the methods of learning these languages, as well as the time frame of language acquisition. Some children in Ukraine are bilingual with two first languages. In this paper, this data was not included because more specific information is needed to qualify the conditions of children’s language development, for example, interviews with parents about bilingual methods, etc.

4 Conclusion

The sociolinguistic survey conducted at the beginning of 2022 shows the use of Ukrainian and Russian languages in Kyiv families raising preschool children. The data reveal that families for whom Ukrainian is the home language do not represent the majority of the local community. Bilingual family language practices are common. Respondents are committed to changing their speech behaviour and that of their children. The socialization process significantly influences the development of pre-schoolers' speech skills, not always in a positive manner. The non-formal bilingualism of preschool groups and the mostly neutral Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism of family language policies stimulate the development of bilingual language competence by Ukrainian children. Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism is not the goal of the Ukrainian education system. Ukraine's current state language policy is aimed at supporting the Ukrainian language in every possible way and restoring the fullness of its functions. The survey showed that parents' opinions and their family language policies often have multilingual child development goals, i.e., growing up with two or more languages. In this case, success in learning each language is a direct consequence of the quantity and quality of their everyday language experience, including at home, in day-care and preschools, and in the broader community context. It is worth highlighting that the experience of each family and each child is unique. To promote successful bilingual development, we need to support frequent exposure to high-quality experiences in each of a child's languages.

It is essential to describe in detail the communicative situations in which bilingual children prefer one or another contact language. This will be the task of future studies.


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