

Linguistic Conversion in Ukraine: Nation-Building on the Self

Laada Bilaniuk

***Abstract:** Linguistic conversion is the choice that some Ukrainians have made to categorically change their everyday linguistic practices, to speak only Ukrainian in all contexts. In a country where most people are at least passively bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian, this move has more symbolic than practical implications for day-to-day communication. This symbolic significance is key as the issue of language choice has been central in debates about Ukraine’s policies and its cultural and political orientation. Linguistic conversion is an assertion of agency through active construction of one’s personal identity, which has the potential to shift the overall linguistic landscape and narratives of belonging in the country. This article draws on life-story interviews as well as published accounts of linguistic conversion of people of both Russian and Ukrainian ethnic descent to examine the circumstances and motivations that have led them to make the choice to speak only Ukrainian. Their stories illuminate the factors shaping ideologies of national belonging in Ukraine.*

“Poroshenko’s linguistic coming-out” was the topic of an article in the *Ukrains’ka Pravda* media outlet in December 2018 (Romanenko 2018). The “coming-out”—rendered via the Anglicism *kaminhaut*—referred to the Ukrainian president’s admission that he did not speak Ukrainian before 1997. He had grown up in the Odesa oblast, speaking Russian, with Russian as the medium of instruction in his schooling, and with some exposure to *surzhyk* (a varied mixture of Ukrainian and Russian) in his grandmother’s village. Language is often taken as symbolic of a person’s allegiances, so the fact that the Ukrainian president did not actually speak Ukrainian until relatively