
Ukrainian Matters: Exploring Language Ideologies
in Ukrainian Community Schools in Italy
*Ukrajiniščina je pomembna: raziskovanje jezikovnih ideologij
ukrajinskih skupnostnih šol v Italiji*

L'ucraino è importante: un'esplorazione delle ideologie linguistiche delle scuole
comunitarie ucraine in Italia

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Abstract

As social contexts of teaching and learning, community schools are spaces where language ideologies are constructed and reproduced. These ideologies often fail to acknowledge the multiplicity and complexity of diasporic populations with negative effects on community language learning and maintenance. This study focuses on the language ideologies of teachers working in a community schools in Italy. Owing to Ukraine's complex history and multi-ethnic make-up, the Ukrainian community is highly diverse in terms of its members' linguistic repertoires and practices. Its internal diversity and heterogeneity, however, are not acknowledged as assets and resources in the community schools, where monoglossic perspectives and prescriptive standard language ideologies shape teachers' beliefs and ideologies.

Keywords: community schools, community languages, language maintenance, language ideologies, Ukrainian

Izvleček

Skupnostne šole kot družbeni konteksti poučevanja in učenja predstavljajo prostore, kjer se jezikovne ideologije oblikujejo in reproducirajo. Te ideologije pogosto ne upoštevajo večplastnosti in kompleksnosti diasporicnih skupnosti, kar ima negativne posledice za učenje in ohranjanje skupnostnega jezika. Raziskava se osredotoča na jezikovne ideologije učiteljev, ki delujejo v ukrajinskih skupnostnih šolah v Italiji. Zaradi kompleksne zgodovine Ukrajine in njene večetnične sestave je ukrajinska skupnost zelo raznolika glede na jezikovne repertoarje ter prakse svojih članov. Kljub temu pa ta notranja raznolikost in heterogenost v skupnostnih šolah nista prepoznani kot vrednota ali vir, saj tam prevladujejo monoglosne perspektive in preskriptivne ideologije standardnega jezika, ki oblikujejo prepričanja in prakse učiteljev. *Ključne besede:* skupnostne šole, skupnostni jeziki, ohranjanje jezika, jezikovne ideologije, ukrajiniščina

Sintesi

In quanto contesti sociali di insegnamento e apprendimento, le scuole comunitarie rappresentano spazi in cui le ideologie linguistiche vengono costruite e riprodotte. Tali ideologie spesso non riconoscono la molteplicità e la complessità delle popolazioni diasporiche, con effetti negativi sull'apprendimento e sul mantenimento della lingua comunitaria. Questo studio si concentra sulle ideologie linguistiche degli insegnanti che operano nelle scuole comunitarie ucraine in Italia. A causa della complessa storia dell'Ucraina e della sua composizione multiethnica, la comunità ucraina è altamente diversificata in termini di repertori e pratiche linguistiche dei suoi membri. Tuttavia, questa diversità e eterogeneità interna non vengono riconosciute come risorse e valori nelle scuole comunitarie, dove prospettive monoglottiche e ideologie prescrittive della lingua standard modellano le convinzioni e le pratiche degli insegnanti.

Parole chiave: scuole comunitarie, lingue comunitarie, mantenimento linguistico, ideologie linguistiche, ucraino

Introduction

Community schools are informal educational institutions, often volunteer-led, that operate outside of the mainstream, state system of schooling. They are set up by diasporic communities with the aim to maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage (Li 2006; Danjo and Moreh 2020). Though linked by common histories of migration and common countries of origin, these communities are usually not homogeneous or monolithic, and their community languages reflect the diversity and pluralism of their homelands (Li 2018a). Many diasporic communities speak non-standard varieties alongside the standard or sometimes even exclusively so (Karatsareas 2021).

As social contexts of teaching and learning, community schools are spaces where language ideologies are constructed and reproduced. These ideologies often fail to acknowledge the multiplicity and complexity of diasporic populations, with negative effects on community language learning and maintenance: learners may become discouraged and disengaged from learning the community language if their linguistic resources are not recognized and valued (Matras and Karatsareas 2020). It is thus fundamental to investigate the complex language ideologies circulating in community schools.

This research aims to contribute to this body of inquiry by investigating the language ideologies held by leaders and teachers involved in two Ukrainian community schools in Italy. The work will also explore whether these language ideologies reflect dominant ideologies in Ukraine. Ukrainian community schools in Italy provide an appropriate and fruitful terrain of investigation due to the size of the Ukrainian migrant population (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica 2024), and because community education is the only opportunity available for community language learning in this country (Machetti et al. 2018). Studies in contexts of Ukrainian migration inside Europe found that parents consider community education of great importance for complementing learning in mainstream education, also because the level of the foreign educational systems is often regarded as lower

than the level and quality of educational provision in Ukraine (Tereshchenko and Grau Cárdenas 2013). The over sixty Ukrainian community schools in Italy are well-attended and highly significant to the Ukrainian diasporic population for the maintenance of the heritage language and culture (Bocale 2023).

Using the theory of language ideologies (Kroskrity 2004; Creese and Blackledge 2010; Rosa and Burdick 2017; Kiramba 2018; Kiramba et al. 2023) and the sociolinguistics of post-multilingualism (Li 2018b) as a conceptual and theoretical framework, the following research questions will be addressed in this study:

- (1) What are prevailing teachers' language ideologies in Ukrainian community schools in Italy?
- (2) How do these ideologies relate to language ideologies circulating in Ukraine?

The paper starts with a discussion of the theoretical background, exploring the relevance of the concept of language ideologies in research on community schools. It then proceeds to illustrate the context of the study, with an overview of the Ukrainian community and Ukrainian community education in Italy. This background information is essential for understanding the social, cultural, and linguistic importance of Ukrainian community schools in Italy, as well as the linguistic repertoires of Ukrainian students and the language ideologies held by teachers. After a brief description of the methods used, the next sections offer an analysis of the findings and a discussion of their implications for understanding the aims and practices of Ukrainian community schools in Italy.

Theoretical Background

The research has been guided by two central theoretical frameworks: research on language ideologies and the sociolinguistics of post-multilingualism. The notion of language ideologies has emerged as an important analytical tool in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics starting from the 1980s. Silverstein (1979, 1993) first defined language ideologies as 'sets of beliefs about language articu-

lated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use'. Following Silverstein (1979), Kroskrity (2004, 501) observed that language ideologies are embedded in the social practices of people and 'represent the perception of language and discourse that is constructed in the interest of a specific social or cultural group'. Because they are constructed from the socio-cultural experience of the speaker, language ideologies are always necessarily multiple, and can be both articulated and embodied. That is to say that while speakers may be aware of and often explicitly articulate language ideologies when expressing their views on language, these ideologies can also be interpreted from actual use (Kroskrity 2004).

Current research on language ideologies aims to highlight how overt expressions of views on language are modes of performativity and presentations of self that take part in processes of linguistic empowerment and subordination in societal realms and institutions of power (Rosa and Burdick 2017). The language-and-identity ideology, for example, which 'emphasises the inherent emotional and spiritual connection between a person and his/her native language' (Myhill 1999, 34), can profoundly affect the ways in which individuals use linguistic resources to index particular identities and to evaluate the linguistic resources used by others.

Among the language ideologies most closely associated with teaching and learning, and that are relevant for this study, there are the standard language ideology, i.e. the belief that languages exist in desirable, homogeneous standardised forms (Davies 2012), and the ideology of purism, which assigns high or low status to language varieties (Horner 2005). Closely related to the 'one nation-one language' ideology, that emphasises the link between language and national identity on the basis of the notion that a nation is defined by a single language, is the mother tongue ideology, i.e. the belief that individuals have one and only one 'mother tongue'. It is essential to remember that all language ideologies translate into practices critical to working within educational institutions: because of their potential normative power, the lan-

guage ideologies of teachers and school leaders, including those in community education, can have a profound impact on the learning and personal development of students (Creese and Blackledge 2010; Blackledge and Creese 2010).

Teachers in schools set up by diasporic and minority communities form their beliefs about language and language use under the influence of language ideologies that circulate in their home countries (Karatsareas 2021). In Ukraine, two language ideologies have been identified as prevailing. The ideology of understanding (Kulyk 2018), or 'language does not matter' ideology, i.e. it does not matter what language you speak (Bilaniuk 2016), considers language mainly a means for conveying information, thus embracing the widespread multilingualism of the country. The ideology of identification, or 'language matters', on the opposite, considers a language a fundamental attribute of nationhood, and views the Ukrainian language as a symbolic emblem of independence. Since the country's independence in 1991, these language stances have exerted a deep and comprehensive influence on the language and education policies pursued in Ukraine. The ideology of Ukrainian as a fundamental marker of the national identity has been implemented through educational policies aimed at linguistically unifying the country, and through programmes of support of Ukrainian language education abroad, such as the International Ukrainian School (Mižnarodna Ukraïns'ka Škola, <https://uis.org.ua>), a department created within the Ministry of Education of Ukraine to allow citizens of Ukraine living abroad the possibility of obtaining Ukrainian certificates of higher education upon successful completion and passing of final examinations (Tereshchenko and Grau Cárdenas 2013). The ideology of understanding has also influenced the political debate and found implementation from time to time in various legislative measures, including the 2003 ratification of the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (Council of E), which gives ample rights to use minority languages in regions where minorities constitute a substantial proportion of the population (Bocale 2022).

To make sense of linguistic diversity in diasporic communities, this study draws on the theoretical perspectives offered by the sociolinguistics of post-multilingualism, which advocates for new paradigms and methodologies to address multilingualism in an era characterized not simply by multiple language ownership, but by 'more complex interweaving of languages and language varieties, and where boundaries between languages, between language and the nation-state are being constantly reassessed, broken or adjusted' (Li 2018b, 22). The focus is no more on multiple discrete languages, but on 'a complex of specific semiotic resources' (Blommaert 2010, 102), a repertoire of linguistic tools developed over the course of a person's lifetime, on which speakers rely to interact in a highly mobile and networked society. It has been advocated that the post-multilingualism era should urge community schools to address fundamental questions about their purposes and goals as community institutions (Karatsareas 2021).

In addition, the study has also drawn from research on community education. Community schools - also referred to as 'heritage,' 'supplementary,' 'additional,' 'mother tongue,' 'weekend,' or 'Saturday' schools - are non-formal educational institutions that exist outside the mainstream public education system. These schools are typically established by migrant communities with the primary aim of preserving their linguistic and cultural heritage, while also addressing perceived shortcomings in the host country's formal educational structure (Li 2018a; Nordstrom 2022; Steenwegen et al. 2023). Community schools are commonly promoted by diaspora and ethnic minority groups, often with the support of volunteers who may or may not possess formal teaching credentials. These institutions usually operate part-time, holding classes during weekday evenings or weekends, and are frequently hosted in facilities rented from public schools.

In this study, the term 'community' was chosen deliberately, as it conveys a sense of shared values, beliefs, and collective purpose - key elements that are vital for the success and sustainability of

volunteer-driven initiatives. Such initiatives rely heavily on community involvement to provide educational benefits to the entire group. Moreover, the term emphasizes the social roles these schools play, not only as educational spaces but also as centres for fostering connectivity, providing support, and building socio-cultural networks for a wide range of stakeholders, including children, youth, parents, teachers, educators, and the broader community. The word 'community' highlights the ongoing process of identity formation and maintenance, which occurs through cultural practices such as language acquisition, the celebration of traditions, and the transmission of customs. This aspect of identity formation is particularly significant in Ukrainian schools, where the preservation of language is central, yet many students may not have been raised in Ukrainian-speaking homes.

The term 'heritage,' which often connotes the transmission of inherited values and practices (Prott and O'Keefe 1992), and when used in conjunction with 'language,' typically refers to the language spoken at home (Rothman 2009), does not fully encompass the complex and multifaceted nature of language learning in the context of Ukrainian schools. In these schools, many students do not fit the typical mold of 'heritage' learners because they were not raised in Ukrainian-speaking environments. Additionally, terms like 'supplementary' (Li 2006) or 'additional' (Andrews 2016) risk positioning these schools as secondary or less significant than the mainstream education system, which fails to capture the essential role they play in their communities. Thus, 'community schools' is the most appropriate term, as it reflects the social, cultural, and educational functions that these institutions serve.

In Italy, community education is closely linked to the lack of provision for community languages in the mainstream education system (Machetti et al. 2018). As in other contexts of immigration, this form of informal educational institution arose in Italy as a strategic response to the limitations of the dominant assimilationist paradigm in the national school system, which prioritizes instruction in Italian and, to a lesser extent,

English as a foreign language, often to the exclusion of students' linguistic and cultural diversity (Brigadoi Cologna 2023). Consequently, community schools in Italy play a vital role in the maintenance and learning of community languages, which are often spoken by first- and second-generation migrant children. In these schools, the linguistic and cultural re-sources that children from migrant minority groups bring with them are both valued and reinforced, helping to preserve and celebrate their heritage while ensuring that these re-sources contribute meaningfully to their educational development.

The Ukrainian Community and Ukrainian Community Education in Italy

Ukrainian immigration to Italy has occurred since the early 1990s, after the dissolution of the USSR and within the broader context of East-West labour migration in Europe (Cvajner and Sciortino 2010). In 2023, legally residing Ukrainian citizens constitute the first largest non-EU migrant population in Italy ($N = 273,484$, Istituto Nazionale di Statistica 2024). The vast majority (almost seventy six percent) of the Ukrainian migrant population consists of women (Tuttitalia N.d, data for 1 January 2025), usually mostly employed as care workers, and who left regions that had no previous history of emigration to Western Europe (Cvajner 2019). The nature of employment probably accounts for the fact that Ukrainian immigrants are scattered throughout Italy, with the highest concentrations in the Lombardy, Campania, Emilia-Romagna and Lazio regions.

Italy implemented amnesty and major labour regularisation programmes for illegal immigrants in 2002, 2009, and 2020, creating conditions that favoured the arrival of the children left behind by their migrant mothers. In the school year 2022-2023, Ukrainians between the ages of 6 and 19 years constituted 4.7% ($N = 43,357$) of all foreign students, making them the fifth most numerous migrant group in Italian schools (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito 2024). Social mobility was closely tied to education in the USSR (Gu-

gushvili 2017). In post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, education is still valued as a form of social capital that can advance social mobility, material security and community standing. A large number of Ukrainian women migrants have university education, many had been part of the college-educated Soviet population employed in clerical and administrative jobs, which was affected most significantly by the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Cvajner 2019). They ascribe great importance to education, and want their children to go to college and graduate for their future prosperity both in the new society and within their own community.

Community languages are never taught in Italian mainstream schools, neither to students with a migrant background, nor to native students, and neither as part of the core curriculum (i.e. during the school day), nor as part of after-school activities (i.e. on school premises, after school hours) (Machetti et al. 2018). Given this absence of provision in the state system, the main responsibility for language maintenance lies, as in other diasporic or minority contexts, with the communities themselves (Li 2006). The absence of an 'old' Ukrainian diaspora in Italy has pushed labour migrants to self-organize, create networks and take responsibility for their own forms of educational activism (Corsale 2021). A comparison of data available on the Ukrainian Embassy website (Posol'stvo Ukraïny v Italijs'kij Respublici 2024), The Ukrainian Consulate in Naples website (General'ne konsul'stvo Ukraïny v Neapoli 2022), and on the *Ukraïns'ka Hazeta*, the main Ukrainian-language newspaper in Italy (Soronevych n.d.), shows that there are over sixty community schools caring for members of the Ukrainian community. They operate on the premises of Italian state schools, or Ukrainian Greek Catholic parishes, or Ukrainian organisations. Most of the schools cater for students from six to nineteen years and run classes once over the weekend (the independent schools usually on Saturday mornings, the church-affiliated usually on Sundays, before or after Mass) for up to 4 hours. A few schools have kindergartens, too, and pre-school groups. All schools teach Ukrain-

ian language, history and culture, but also arts subjects such as Ukrainian music, chorus, dancing, and drama. Religion and catechism are always core-subjects in the church-affiliated schools, but also independent schools may include some religious education in their curricula, focusing on ethics and spirituality. The geographical distribution of the schools reflects the density of the Ukrainian migrant communities in a given area: sixty percent of the schools are in northern Italy, especially in the regions of Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, and Veneto; twenty percent in Central Italy, and the remaining twenty percent in the southern regions, particularly in Campania.

The teachers and managers of the schools are always members of the community, or parish priests from the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Other common characteristics include: lack of funding from the Italian Ministry of Education or local authorities; work in isolation from state-funded educational institutions; voluntary teachers who are not remunerated for their work (sometimes travelling and phone expenses are reimbursed); learners grouped according to their ages and not their ability.

Some schools, both independent and church-affiliated, follow the syllabus issued by the International Ukrainian School, which includes Ukrainian Language, Ukrainian Literature, History of Ukraine, World History, Maths, and Art, as well as Biology, Physics and Chemistry in the senior classes of secondary school. The International Ukrainian School doesn't fund the schools abroad, but provides assistance with textbooks, consultation for teachers, and assessment of students, which, in Italy, takes place yearly in June and is carried out by visiting Ukrainian examiners. Given that Italian certificates for secondary schools are not valid in Ukraine, Ukrainian parents have a strong incentive to enrol their children in community schools offering the opportunity to graduate from the International Ukrainian School.

As a result of its long history and borderland location, Ukraine is a poly-ethnic state with a complex ethnic composition (Kulyk 2013). Ac-

cording to the last Ukrainian census held in 2001, Ukrainians account for 77.8% of the population, the next most populous nationality are Russians at 17.3%, and other ethnic groups (there are over 130 recognized minorities) account for 4.9%. In terms of language identification, Ukrainian and Russian predominate: 67.5% of Ukraine's population claims Ukrainian as their native language, while 29.6% indicates Russian. The total share of all other languages spoken is 2.9%. However, the language identification declared in censuses differs from actual language use (Bocale 2015), with Russian spoken by about a third of the Ukrainians (Kulyk 2013), and by the majority of the minorities.

Flexible multilingual practices are a common feature of the Ukrainian community in Italy. Some Ukrainian migrants speak Ukrainian as a first language and others Russian, and the majority has at least a practical knowledge of both. The Ukrainian part of their repertoire consists of two varieties, Standard Ukrainian and Suržyk. Suržyk is a form of mixed Ukrainian-Russian speech emerged from the long contact between the two genetically and structurally very closely related East Slavic languages, a highly variable code which exists almost only in oral form (Del Gaudio 2010; Hentschel and Taranenko 2021; Hentschel 2024). Because of the wide use of Suržyk in Ukraine, and the fact that it has a big number of absolute speakers, some researchers advance the hypothesis of a situation of Ukrainian-Russian-Suržyk tricodality in the country (Hentschel and Taranenko 2021). The two varieties are strongly hierarchized, with Suržyk stigmatized as a symbol of cultural lowness, ruralness and provincialism (Bilaniuk 2018). Standard Ukrainian is the language of education, official contexts, and Ukrainian media, while Suržyk is the language of the home and of a great deal of the ordinary intercourse between Ukrainian migrants.

The Study

Methods

Data for the research presented in this paper was collected over a period of six months (December 2022–May 2023) and is drawn from a wider on-

going longitudinal study of teaching practices and language ideologies at Ukrainian community schools in Italy. The study adopts a qualitative research design, aiming to capture participants' perspectives, teaching practices, and the sociocultural meanings attached to language use in these educational spaces. The two schools were selected through purposive sampling because they are located in Rome and Milan, the Italian cities with the largest Ukrainian migrant populations (Tuttitalia 2024, data for 1 January 2025), and therefore offer particularly rich contexts for examining community-based heritage language education. The schools were also deliberately chosen because they exemplify two different types of Ukrainian community schools operating in Italy. The Rome school, which is run in the premises of a mainstream Italian state school, follows the syllabus of the International Ukrainian School. Upon completion of Year 11, students who pass the final examination are issued with a Ukrainian certificate of secondary education. The Milan school is not specifically oriented towards the attainment of an educational certificate. In this school the curriculum consists of Ukrainian language, Ukrainian literature, history of Ukraine, STEM subjects including educational robotics, and extra-curricular activities including music and other arts disciplines. Thus, the sampling of the schools allows the investigation of language ideologies in diverse settings and configurations of teaching practices within Ukrainian community education in Italy.

Data collection combined several qualitative methods, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators, and the gathering of relevant institutional documents such as curricula, lesson plans, and school communications. Observations focused on interactional routines, instructional strategies, and the ways in which Ukrainian was mobilized in classroom activities. Interviews explored participants' beliefs about language, identity, and the goals of community schooling, while documents provided insight into the schools'

stated pedagogical orientations and ideological frameworks.

All collected materials were transcribed, anonymized, and analysed using thematic analysis. Coding proceeded iteratively, moving from initial open coding to the development of broader thematic categories that captured recurring patterns across the dataset. Particular attention was paid to how language ideologies were articulated, negotiated, and enacted in everyday pedagogical practice. The findings are presented in an integrated narrative form, supported by illustrative excerpts from fieldnotes and interview transcripts to foreground participants' voices and to demonstrate how themes emerged from the data.

In total, nine teachers were interviewed in this phase of the research. Students and parents were not interviewed, because the initial aim of the study was to identify teachers' language ideologies and assumptions about language. For this paper, the analysis is drawn particularly on four semi-structured interviews conducted with Marina (all names are pseudonyms), the head principal of the Rome community school who has both administrative and educational duties; Anna, one of the volunteer teachers at the Rome school; Alina and Olena, who both manage and teach in the Milan school. All teachers had at least a baccalaureate degree; two had a master's degree. All possessed a teaching qualification and had been teachers in Ukraine.

All interviewees agreed to participate. Written consent was obtained from all participants, and all were guaranteed anonymity. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms selected by the author.

Ukrainian Matters

In discussing their schools' curriculum and learning objectives, all interviewees placed a heavy emphasis on the Ukrainian language as one of the most fundamental elements in the formation of a Ukrainian identity among students. They viewed Ukrainian as a symbolic carrier of Ukrainian culture and tradition, and as an iconic and essential feature of nationhood.

In our school we aim to foster pride of the students' Ukrainian heritage. The Ukrainian language is an essential component of the Ukrainian culture. [Alina]

If you want to identify with a people or culture, you should know their language; if you want to identify with your own people, you should know your own language. [Anna]

These views can be seen as consistent with the ideology of Ukrainian as a fundamental attribute of the Ukrainian state (Bilaniuk 2016), and with opinions about the function of Ukrainian as a unifying tool of ethnic identification in contemporary Ukraine (Kulyk 2018). Also, they express conceptions of language as a key site of identity formation and belonging that enables people to build community and perceptions of self (Joseph 2013).

In Ukraine, discourses of national identity have significantly increased since the Maidan protests in late 2013, particularly after Russia's annexation of Crimea, the military intervention in Eastern Ukraine (Shulga 2015) and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, although it has been disputed to what degree language has played the chief role in framing Ukrainian national identity (Bureiko and Moga 2019). The war has resulted in the strengthening of a Ukrainian national identity that equates Ukraine with the Ukrainian language. Ukrainian has been embraced as a source of resilience and unity under the experience of war, and is now increasingly associated with youth, and the present and future of the country (Kudriavtseva 2023). Its symbolic relevance as a sign of Ukrainian national identification has become fundamental also for the Ukrainian refugees who have fled their homes (Özgür and Deniz 2023; Podgórska et al. 2024).

Among members of the Ukrainian diaspora, the discursive construction of a strong Ukrainian national identity based on knowledge of Ukrainian has been documented, with language becoming a key factor in drawing the borders of in-group and out-group social groups and imagined communities (Beliaeva and Seals 2020). While echoing ideologies from their home country, the inter-

viewed teachers were also affirming their sense of belongingness both with members of the Ukrainian nation, and with other members of the Ukrainian diaspora. Moreover, by working voluntarily at the comprehensive schools, teachers were investing their time, energy and commitment in their diaspora community, and this reinforced their association to their homeland.

Within weeks of fleeing Ukraine and arriving in Italy, many refugee children have begun attending Ukrainian community schools. Educators and families see this shift as a significant moment in the children's lives, marking a move toward greater physical and social stability.

In Italian schools, the children initially appear withdrawn and anxious, feeling out of place and overwhelmed by sadness and worry. However, upon entering the community school and hearing Ukrainian spoken in the classroom, they begin to smile again, connecting with peers who share their language. This creates for them a sense of comfort and security. [Alina]

Upon reaching a country of temporary asylum or permanent settlement, refugees often experience isolation due to the violence and displacement they faced in their home country. Refugee children are typically enrolled in schools soon after their arrival, where they must adjust to significant changes, such as new classmates and teachers, a different culture and language, as well as unfamiliar educational practices and evaluation methods (Biasutti et al. 2020). In interviews, community schools were described as reliable sources of both emotional and practical support for refugee children and their families.

In community schools, children find connections with others who share similar situations and experiences. These schools offer opportunities for supportive interactions with peers who come from the same ethnic and cultural backgrounds and who have gone through similar experiences of war and displacement. [Anna]

The use of their native language in community schools creates a more engaging and supportive learning atmosphere for refugee children, fostering a stronger sense of belonging and leading to improved academic performance compared to the mainstream schools they attend in the morning.

Teachers feel not only responsible for helping students cope with their traumatic experiences and personal journeys toward adulthood, but also for preventing the feared assimilation into the majority population, which could lead to the loss of Ukrainian language and culture within the diaspora.

The greatest threat to these children is assimilation into mainstream Italian culture. Many children from immigrant families have already integrated into the broader culture, often identifying more with it than with their Ukrainian ethnic background. [Alina]

In the Milan school, there were eight pupils who had recently arrived from Ukraine and were at the early stages of learning Italian. These students were particularly cherished by the teachers for their 'Ukrainianess', and perceived as an aid to the learning of other children in the school.

Appreciating the beauty and musicality of Ukrainian was considered an important objective of teaching the language.

If you are Ukrainian, it is important to know how beautiful and melodious the Ukrainian language is. [Olena]

Ukrainian melodiousness was contrasted to the 'harshness' of the Russian language, which Olena described as a language with heavy consonant clusters, especially in syllables where Ukrainian has a consonant-vowel syllable structure. This contrasting comparison between the two languages, and criticism of the acoustic characteristics of Russian, echo the recurrent myth of the melodiousness of Ukrainian, which was born out of a romanticized desire to promote the use of the language by movements for the independence of the country (Friedman 2010).

Students' lack of fluency in speaking Ukrainian was felt problematic and seen to undermine possible return migration in future.

If children attending our school don't achieve sufficient language skills to express their feelings and ideas adequately in literary Ukrainian, this may influence their future lives in Ukraine. [Olena]

These comments reveal that, beyond its symbolic function as a marker of shared identity and groupness (Edwards 2010), Ukrainian was perceived as a necessary tool to preserve ties to the homeland, and to foresee return as a possible long-term objective, a more instrumental function that has been reported by other studies on community education (Sierens and Van Avermaet 2017).

For teachers working in the Rome School, which follows the curriculum of the Ukrainian International School designed by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science, promotional discourses about the strategic value of learning proficiently the standardised community language revoice institutionally-sanctioned ideologies that frame Ukrainian as an economic and communicative resource, and as a vehicle of cultural inheritance. Within the logics of teachers' reference to possible future difficulties encountered by learners due to lack of adequate knowledge of the standard language lie attempts to delegitimise and erase non-standardised varieties of Ukrainian, which will be analysed in the next section.

Standard Ukrainian Matters

All teachers expressed concerns about the purity of the Ukrainian language spoken by the students. In both schools, about two-third of students were Italy-born of Ukrainian heritage, and lived in multilingual households where Italian was the primary language, and standardised and non-standardised/hybrid varieties of Italian, Ukrainian, and Russian were spoken to some extent. Teachers were aware that students had little exposure to Standard Ukrainian outside of school, and could find it challenging to speak the language in class.

When they first arrive in our school, many students are afraid and embarrassed to speak Ukrainian. [Marina]

There were perceptions that the language of instruction and the language students spoke at home were two different entities, and worries that the language of the home could affect students' abilities to speak Ukrainian fluently and appropriately.

One of the biggest issues we have to face as teachers is the quality of the language spoken by the children. It all starts at home [...] they are used to hearing two, or even three languages at home, but these languages are not pure, there is a lot of language mixing [...]. At school children hear good literary Ukrainian from the teachers, but they often reply in their own hybrid language. [Olena]

This account shows that although the linguistic heterogeneity of children was acknowledged, the language practices of the home were not recognized as acceptable in the school setting. For Olena, the quality of the language spoken by the students constituted a key element in their education. This was an ideological position shared by all teachers: they felt that if they worked hard to realise the objective of having the students speak good 'pure' Ukrainian they were guaranteed success and personal satisfaction.

Children use forms of a language together with forms of another language interchangeably and unconsciously, sometimes they use *Suržyk* or dialectal forms [...] As teachers it is our duty to correct their errors, however it is basically impossible to correct everything [...]. [Marina]

Teachers' bias towards an essentialist and purist approach to language use, and their conscious effort to keep the students' language pure from the influence of non-standard varieties or other languages, are deeply rooted in powerful ideologies of language purism and standard language practices, which are pervasive in Ukraine. Bilaniuk (2018) discusses the existence of a highly purist ideology

among Ukrainian linguists and educators, resulting in a general agreement on the undesirability of Russified forms in Ukrainian, i.e. of *Suržyk*. The attempt to eradicate *Suržyk* has led to the development of educational resources, including websites, where 'surzhycisms' are compared with their 'pure' Ukrainian equivalents, in order for speakers to know how to correct their own mistakes.

For the interviewees, it seems fundamental to stress that they invest a lot of effort in correcting the shortcomings of their students' speech. Similar to the observations of Friedman (2010) on the classroom practices in Ukrainian schools, and of Harrison (2021) on language practices in Ukrainian community classes in the UK, the ideal of a 'pure' standard language seems to be one of the dominant language ideologies within the community classrooms. And indeed research has shown that heritage language learning is often thought of as an effort towards imposing linguistic, cultural and racial purity on migrant communities (Flores and Rosa 2015).

Another point expressed by the teachers was related to parents' expectations and beliefs about the community schools' goals and functions. Alina noted that parents sent their children to the school so as to ensure that they learned the language and culture as they were taught in their home country, where teachers place a lot of emphasis on monitoring student progress and language competency through constant assessment and continual correction. In his view, parents valued a teacher-fronted approach with a lot of emphasis on explicit grammar instruction, which they saw as the most effective type of language teaching. The controlled and authoritative style of teaching and class-management was implied to guarantee proficiency and accuracy in the standard language. Similar to other community schools (Karatsareas 2021), the pedagogic practices and principles underpinning the teaching in these contexts mirror the educational practices and instructional methods of the countries of origin, taken as the benchmark by which to judge what the teaching should look like.

Research on language ideologies in community schools' settings has uncovered that teachers

can act as vehicles of prescriptive standard language discourses that delegitimise and shame non-standardised varieties, with a range of negative effects on students' learning and construction of self-image (Cushing et al. 2021). These findings confirm the condemnation of non-standardised varieties of the learners' community languages, which has been found to occur in schools of different diasporic communities, in particular those that are characterised by diglossic/multilingual practices (Matras and Karatsareas 2020). Students who fail to meet normative and monolingual expectations are told that their language is not good enough, and that in order to achieve success they will need to make efforts to change the way they speak. Although well-meaning, teachers' devaluation of students' own linguistic resources on the basis of standard and purist codes that aim to erase difference, their prejudice against language mixing, and their emphasis on the benefits and rewards of knowing 'good' Ukrainian are examples of the embodiment of language ideologies that work to the detriment of many multilingual speakers (Rosa and Burdick 2017), who could end up 'experiencing their multilingualism as a curse rather than a fact of life' (Ortega 2019, 34).

Discussion and Conclusions

The case of the Ukrainian migrant community in Italy demonstrates that a single, uniform categorisation is insufficient for understanding the internal dynamics of minority groups. Owing to Ukraine's complex historical development and multi-ethnic composition, the community is characterised by considerable linguistic diversity, with members drawing on a wide range of repertoires and practices. This internal heterogeneity, however, is not recognised as a resource within the community schools. Instead, monoglossic orientations and prescriptive standard-language ideologies strongly inform teachers' beliefs and pedagogical decisions. Students are encouraged to abandon their home varieties in favour of the standard national form, which is presented not only as the most appropriate linguistic model but also as an essential marker of Ukrainian ethnocultural identity.

The analysis reveals that the everyday language practices of the migrant community are frequently treated as illegitimate or deficient. Such evaluations are closely connected to broader cultural and historical narratives that have shaped understandings of language and identity in Ukraine. Teachers' idealised conceptions of Ukrainianness reinforce the belief that the standard variety alone authentically represents the nation and its people. This perspective also supports the assumption that Ukrainian is inherently the mother tongue of all Ukrainians and functions as a key symbol of national unity, sovereignty, and cultural continuity.

Within this ideological framework, adherence to the standard language is not merely a linguistic preference but is interpreted as an expression of loyalty to a valued norm associated with education, public life, and national institutions. It is therefore understandable that teachers in community schools may view the standardisation of students' language use as part of a broader effort to affirm the legitimacy and authority of Ukrainian as a national language.

However, the emphasis on monolingual, standardised forms has significant implications. It risks devaluing the linguistic resources that heritage speakers bring from home and may contribute to the stigmatization of students whose speech diverges from idealised norms. This outcome is paradoxical, given that community schools aim to support and strengthen the linguistic and cultural identities of the children they serve. Even more concerning is the possibility that the lack of recognition for home varieties may alienate young speakers from the community language, potentially accelerating a shift toward exclusive use of the majority language. Further fieldwork with students and parents will be necessary to assess how teachers' language ideologies and standardising practices influence learners' engagement with Ukrainian community education.

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Povzetek

Pričujoči članek analizira jezikovne ideologije, prisotne v ukrajinskih skupnostnih šolah v Italiji, s posebnim poudarkom na tem, kako učitelji pojmujejo, vrednotijo in uravnavajo jezikovne prakse otrok v diaspori. Skupnostne šole – neformalne ustanove, ki jih večinoma vodijo prostovoljci in so ustvarjene za ohranjanje jezikovne ter kulturne dediščine migrantskih skupnosti – se kažejo kot strateški prostori, v katerih se predstave, pojmovanja in pogledi na jezik oblikujejo, uresničujejo ter prenašajo naprej. Na podlagi kvalitativnih podatkov, zbranih z opazovanjem pouka, institucionalnimi dokumenti in intervjuji z devetimi učitelji iz dveh šol v Rimu in Milanu, raziskava preučuje, kako ideologije pedagogov odražajo sociolingvistično raznolikost ukrajinske skupnosti ter prevladujoče jezikovne diskurze v Ukrajini.

Ukrajinska migrantska populacija v Italiji je številčna, heterogena in jezikovno raznolika: vklju-

čuje govorce standardne ukrajinščine, ruščine in suržyka ter večjezične družine, v katerih italijanščina postaja vse bolj prevladujoča. Kljub tej raznolikosti učitelji v skupnostnih šolah skoraj izključno spodbujajo monoglosni in predpisovalni pristop, ki daje prednost standardni ukrajinščini. Jezik se razume kot temeljni simbol nacionalne identitete, kulturne kontinuitete in pripadnosti. Takšno stališče odraža ideologijo identifikacije, razširjeno v Ukrajini, ki ukrajinščino vidi kot ključen znak nacionalne pripadnosti, zlasti v kontekstu zapletene geopolitične situacije.

Raziskava ugotavlja, da učitelji ukrajinščino standardno dojemajo ne le kot kulturno bistveno, temveč tudi kot čustveno pomirjujočo za otroke beguncev, ki so nedavno prispeli. Slišati ukrajinščino v razredu je opisano kot dejavnik, ki otrokom pomaga »ponovno najti nasmeh«, saj krepi občutek stabilnosti in pripadnosti. Hkrati učitelji izražajo veliko zaskrbljenost zaradi jezikovnega mešanja, suržyka in vpliva italijanščine, ki jih razumejo kot grožnje jezikovni čistosti. Domače jezikovne različice učencev so pogosto označene kot »hibridni jezik« ali »nečista oblika«, učitelji pa čutijo dolžnost, da posredujejo pri njihovem popravljanju in »normalizaciji«. Takšne prakse odražajo ideologije standardizacije in purizma, dobro dokumentirane v ukrajinskem izobraževalnem diskurzu.

Te ideologije oblikujejo pedagoške pristope, ki dajejo prednost slovnični natančnosti, popravljanju napak in sledenju knjižnim normam. Pričakanja staršev dodatno krepijo takšno usmeritev, saj si mnogi želijo izobraževanja, podobnega ukrajinskemu, ki bi otrokom omogočilo ohranjanje vezi z domovino ali morebitno vrnitev v prihodnosti. Vendar pa lahko ta poudarek na standardizaciji oslabi legitimnost dejanskih jezikovnih repertoarjev učencev in stigmatizira večjezične prakse, ki so v diasporičnih skupnostih naravne.

Raziskava zaključuje, da čeprav skupnostne šole igrajo ključno vlogo pri ohranjanju ukrajinskega jezika in identitete v tujini, lahko njihove monolingvalne in puristične ideologije ovirajo – namesto spodbujajo – jezikovno ohranjanje, saj ne prepoznavajo vrednosti raznolikih jezikovnih virov učencev. Rezultati poudarjajo potrebo po pedagoških pristopih, navdihnenih s postmultilingvalnostjo, ki jezikovne repertoarje razumejo

kot fluidne, dinamične in kontekstualno oblikovane. Prihodnje raziskave, ki bodo vključevale učence in starše, bodo ključne za razumevanje, kako te ideologije vplivajo na angažiranost, oblikovanje identitete in dolgoročen odnos do ukrajinskega jezika.

Riassunto

Il presente articolo analizza le ideologie linguistiche presenti nelle scuole comunitarie ucraine in Italia, con particolare attenzione al modo in cui gli insegnanti concepiscono, valutano e regolano le pratiche linguistiche dei bambini della diaspora. Le scuole comunitarie – istituzioni informali gestite per lo più da volontari e create per preservare il patrimonio linguistico e culturale delle comunità migranti – si rivelano spazi strategici in cui le rappresentazioni, le concezioni e le visioni della lingua si formano, si concretizzano e si trasmettono. Sulla base di dati qualitativi raccolti attraverso l'osservazione delle lezioni, documenti istituzionali e interviste a nove insegnanti di due scuole a Roma e Milano, la ricerca esamina come le ideologie dei pedagoghi riflettano la diversità sociolinguistica della comunità ucraina e i discorsi linguistici dominanti in Ucraina.

La popolazione migrante ucraina in Italia è numerosa, eterogenea e linguisticamente diversificata: comprende parlanti dell'ucraino standard, del russo e del suržyk, nonché famiglie multilingui in cui l'italiano sta diventando sempre più predominante. Nonostante questa diversità, gli insegnanti nelle scuole comunitarie promuovono quasi esclusivamente un approccio monolingue e prescrittivo che privilegia l'ucraino standard. La lingua è intesa come simbolo fondamentale dell'identità nazionale, della continuità culturale e dell'appartenenza. Tale posizione riflette l'ideologia dell'identificazione, diffusa in Ucraina, che vede l'ucraino come un segno chiave di appartenenza nazionale, soprattutto nel contesto di una complessa situazione geopolitica.

La ricerca rileva che gli insegnanti percepiscono l'ucraino standard non solo come culturalmente essenziale, ma anche come emotivamente rassicurante per i bambini rifugiati appena arrivati. Sentire l'ucraino in classe è descritto come un fattore che aiuta i bambini a «ritrovare il sorriso»,

poiché rafforza il senso di stabilità e appartenenza. Allo stesso tempo, gli insegnanti esprimono grande preoccupazione per il mescolamento linguistico, il *suržyk* e l'influenza dell'italiano, che considerano minacce alla purezza linguistica. Le varianti linguistiche domestiche degli alunni sono spesso etichettate come «lingua ibrida» o «forma impura», e gli insegnanti sentono il dovere di intervenire per correggerle e «normalizzarle». Tali pratiche riflettono le ideologie della standardizzazione e del purismo, ben documentate nel discorso educativo ucraino.

Queste ideologie plasmano approcci pedagogici che privilegiano la precisione grammaticale, la correzione degli errori e il rispetto delle norme letterarie. Le aspettative dei genitori rafforzano ulteriormente tale orientamento, poiché molti desiderano un'istruzione simile a quella ucraina, che permetta ai figli di mantenere un legame con la patria o di un eventuale ritorno in futuro. Tuttavia,

questa enfasi sulla standardizzazione può indebolire la legittimità dei repertori linguistici effettivi degli studenti e stigmatizzare le pratiche multilingui, che sono naturali nelle comunità della diaspora.

La ricerca conclude che, sebbene le scuole comunitarie svolgano un ruolo fondamentale nella conservazione della lingua e dell'identità ucraina all'estero, le loro ideologie monolingui e puriste possono ostacolare – anziché incoraggiare – la conservazione linguistica, poiché non riconoscono il valore delle diverse risorse linguistiche degli studenti. I risultati sottolineano la necessità di approcci pedagogici ispirati al post-multilinguismo, che considerino i repertori linguistici come fluidi, dinamici e plasmati dal contesto. Ricerche future che coinvolgano studenti e genitori saranno fondamentali per comprendere come queste ideologie influenzino l'impegno, la formazione dell'identità e l'atteggiamento a lungo termine nei confronti della lingua ucraina.