

Language Issues in Ukrainian Sports Media during the Wartime

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Abstract

This article analyses language issues concerning Ukrainian and Russian in Ukrainian sports media during the wartime in terms of language ideologies. It examines language-related comments of 103 Ukrainian sports figures, including retired athletes, coaches and officials from 21 disciplines. The analysed dataset consists of 127 textual and 31 video units comprising the comments from Ukrainian sports media and athletes' social media platforms. In Ukrainian sports, traditionally associated with Russian as the dominant language, the prominent language-related issue today is the shift from Russian to Ukrainian, triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as is generally observed in wartime Ukraine. Since 2022, at least 31 sports figures publicly announced their language shift. Although language is not inherently linked to sport itself in athletes' discourse, today, language issues are becoming increasingly entangled with war-related topics. Athletes' discourse regarding their language shift reveals patterns: they embrace Ukrainian, explain their linguistic and geographic backgrounds, and distance themselves from Russian. Interviewers highlight athletes' language choice and practice by appraising their Ukrainian and appreciating their effort to speak the language. Overall, athletes' comments reinforce the language ideology "Language matters".

Keywords: Ukrainian, Russian, language ideology, sport, athletes, war, media

Streszczenie

Problemy językowe w ukraińskich mediach sportowych w czasie wojny

W tym artykule analizowane są kwestie językowe dotyczące języka ukraińskiego i rosyjskiego w ukraińskich mediach sportowych w czasie wojny pod kątem ideologii językowych. Analizowane są komentarze 103 ukraińskich osobistości sportowych, w tym emerytowanych sportowców, trenerów i działaczy z 21 dyscyplin. Analizowany zbiór danych składa się ze 127 jednostek tekstowych i 31 jednostek wideo obejmujących komentarze z ukraińskich mediów sportowych i platform mediów społecznościowych sportowców. W ukraińskim sporcie, tradycyjnie kojarzonym z rosyjskim jako językiem dominującym, obecnie dominującym problemem językowym jest zmiana z rosyjskiego na ukraiński, wywołana pełnoskalową inwazją Rosji na Ukrainę, co jest powszechnie obserwowane na Ukrainie w czasie wojny. Od 2022 r. co najmniej 31 osobistości sportowych publicznie ogłosiło zmianę języka. Choć język nie jest z natury związany z samym sportem w dyskursie sportowców, obecnie kwestie językowe coraz bardziej

uwikłane są w tematy związane z wojną. Dyskurs sportowców dotyczący zmiany języka ujawnia wzorce: przyjmują ukraiński, wyjaśniają swoje pochodzenie językowe i geograficzne oraz dystansują się od rosyjskiego. Ankieterzy podkreślają wybór języka i praktykę sportowców, oceniając ich ukraiński i doceniając ich wysiłki, aby mówić tym językiem. Ogólnie rzecz biorąc, komentarze sportowców wzmacniają ideologię językową „Język ma znaczenie”.

Słowa kluczowe: język ukraiński, język rosyjski, ideologia językowa, sport, sportowcy, wojna, media.

1. Introduction

Despite the extensive number of sociolinguistic studies on Ukraine using various objects and approaches, language issues in Ukrainian sports have received scant attention. Only two researches briefly mention Ukrainian sports and the traditional dominance of Russian within this sphere (Масенко 2020, 26; Kulyk 2024, 162). This article aims to examine the language ideologies reflected in Ukrainian sports media by analysing comments on language made by Ukrainian athletes and other sport figures. This analysis considers the significant event of February 2022: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Language ideology refers to “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979, 193) or “beliefs, feelings, and conceptions about language structure and use which often index the political economic interests of individual speakers, ethnic and other interest groups, and nation states” (Kroskryty 2000, 192). Since language ideologies may represent socially shared assumptions, they are also related to certain stereotypes, where language and its speakers are attributed certain characteristics (Garrett 2010, 32-33; Dołowy-Rybińska and Hornsby 2021, 105). In the context of Ukraine, language ideologies pertain to intralinguistic and sociolinguistic concepts, such as native language (Nedashkivska 2021), or Surzhyk, a mixed Ukrainian-Russian speech (Bilaniuk 1997, Kostiušenko 2023). However, the most widespread and contradictory language ideologies in Ukraine are “Language matters (*Mova maie znachennia*)” and “Language does not matter (*Mova ne maie znachennia*)”. According to the former ideology, the Ukrainian language is a crucial factor in aligning with ethnic, civil and national identity and nationhood, whereas the latter dismisses the role of language in defining these concepts (Bilaniuk 2016; Bilaniuk 2020).

A notion closely related to language ideology is language attitude. However, their origins and approaches differ in that while language ideology is rooted in anthropology, language attitude originates from social psychology, quantitative sociolinguistics, and educational

linguistics (Kroskryty 2016). The relationship between language ideology and language attitude is characterized by the former's social nature and the latter's individual nature (Baker 1992, 14–15; Garrett 2010, 34–35; Albury 2020, 371; Dołowy-Rybińska and Hornsby 2021, 106). In this article, an individual's comments on language are interpreted as expressions of their language attitude, which may reflect certain language ideology.

Political changes since Euromaidan in 2013 have affected language ideologies and attitudes in Ukraine, leading to increased use of Ukrainian and a decline in the use of Russian, in both public and personal sphere. The process, where a person shifts from Russian to Ukrainian either partially or entirely, is referred to in the literature as “shift”, “transition” or “language conversion” (Bilaniuk 2016, Bilaniuk 2020). Russia's full-scale invasion significantly accelerated this tendency and ultimately reinforced the “Language matters” ideology (Kulyk 2022; Kulyk 2024; Kostiučenko 2023; Panter 2023; Yaremko and Levchuk 2023; Racek et al. 2024).

Sport may function as a significant site for “the (re)production (i.e. the cyclical process of production and reproduction) of key cultural understandings and social constructs” and “construction of imagined communities with political and ideological imperatives as nations and fans” (Meân 2017, x). Top athletes who represent their country play an integral role in shaping national identity. Athletes are not only capable of uniting a country, even one that is multiethnic, multicultural and multilinguistic, but can also assert its presences and strength, especially when they achieve good results in the international arena. Given the entertainment aspect of sports, athletes wield influence comparable to that of public figures such as actors and singers. They often share their private and professional lives on social media, similar to influencers. Some athletes speak out social and political issues and raises public awareness, which is defined as terms such as athlete activism and athlete advocacy in sports sociology (O'Neill et al. 2023).

Thus, dynamic changes in linguistic ideologies and attitudes during wartime in Ukraine are also expected to be observed in sports sphere, which, as a key part of modern society, contributes to reinforcing national identity and patriotism.

2. Language issues in pre-war sports media and the war's impact

In Ukrainian media, sports in Ukraine, particularly soccer – the most popular sport in the country – are negatively associated with Russian language dominance (Марусик 2012; Марусик 2018; Карась 2021; Вербицький 2022; Kirichenko 2022). During an interview with Oleh Verniaiev, gymnast who publicly announced his language shift from Russian to Ukrainian in 2022, TV news anchor Marichka Padalko articulated twice that “sport in Ukraine is a very Russified

sphere” (Єдині 2023). Such a view is also mentioned by Taras Kremin, Commissioner for the Protection of the State Language (Уповноважений із захисту державної мови 2021a). While the Russian language dominance in Ukrainian sports can not be quantitatively validated and might be seen as a stereotype, it can be explained by several factors related to the Ukrainian linguistic practice. Russian has been the common language among athletes and coaches across different generations, and is often the language of everyday communication in the sports sphere. Additionally, athletes come from Russian-speaking Eastern or Southern regions, or the entire national teams are based in such regions. For instance, the Ukrainian national team of artistic swimming consists of athletes largely from eastern regions of the country – Kharkiv and Donetsk – and trains in Kharkiv. And importantly, athletes have been seen speaking Russian in media.

In some sports, especially team sports such as soccer, Ukrainian-speaking athletes find themselves needing to adjust to Russian-speaking teammates. Back in the Soviet time, the common language at sport schools was Russian, which Ukrainian-speaking children had to adjust to: “I always knew my native language – my parents speak Ukrainian. But when I entered Olympic Reserve School of Brovary, I changed my communication language. People from all of the USSR came to study, and all spoke Russian” [Serhii Dzinziruk, boxer] (Павлечко 2024). The soccer player Artem Dovbyk faced criticism after giving a post-match interview in Russian in 2021, prompting his father to intervene: “Artem speaks Ukrainian with us at home. It’s just that everyone in their team speaks Russian, so he’s accustomed to it. But when he’s with us, he converses just like us” [Oleksandr Dovbyk, father of Artem Dovbyk, soccer player] (BBC 2021). Similarly, the discrepancy between the languages spoken at home and during training was mentioned by the rhythmic gymnast Viktoriia Onopriienko when answering questions on whether she speaks Ukrainian and which language she speaks more often – Russian or Ukrainian: “My whole family speaks Ukrainian. At home, I speak Ukrainian with my parents, but during training and in everyday life, I speak Russian more often” (translation from Russian) [Viktoriia Onopriienko, rhythmic gymnast] (Федерація гімнастики України 2020). In 2024, she expressed her resentment over having had to switch to Russian in her childhood and recounted instances of some Russian-speaking teammates displaying sneering attitudes toward her for speaking Ukrainian at that time (TCH 2024).

In Ukrainian sports media, both pre-war and during the wartime, the fact that a Russian-speaking athlete speaks Ukrainian is considered significant enough to be featured in the headline of an article: “Anna Rizatdinova: ‘I started to speak the native language: everything is possible if you want’” (translation from Russian) (Tribuna 2021). This holds true even when an athlete

pronounces a single sentence in Ukrainian. When the soccer player Iaroslav Rakytskyi said in Ukrainian “I am happy to come back to Shakhtar”, this 2-second short video was titled “(with icons of Ukrainian flag and flushed face) Rakytskyi spoke Ukrainian” (Tribuna Футбол Shorts 2023). The icon of the Ukrainian flag symbolizes the firm connection between the country and the language, and the emoji can be read as an expression of surprise. An athlete who spoke Ukrainian from time to time in media can be featured even over the years: “Selezniiov spoke Ukrainian: I like the word *chemnyi* ‘courteous’” (FootballHub 2018), “Russian-speaking forward Selezniiov unexpectedly spoke Ukrainian in Lviv” (Depo 2020), ‘Selezniiov spoke Ukrainian after Minai’s victory’ (Футбол 24 2021a). As in all these headlines, the Ukrainian inchoative verb *zahovoryty* ‘start to speak’ in the past tense is used to depict the Russian-speaking athletes who performed their verbal action in Ukrainian. However, this does not mean that they speak only Ukrainian on a regular basis. The inchoative semantics here deliver an unexpected fact that the athletes spoke Ukrainian spontaneously, even when they just pronounced well prepared sentences in Ukrainian.

The enactment of the law “On ensuring the functioning of the Ukrainian language as the state language” in 2019 intensified Ukrainization in society and began to impact Ukrainian sports around 2021. Soccer players representing Ukraine at the European Championships in 2021 faced criticism from Taras Kremin, Commissioner for the Protection of the State Language, for conducting after-match interviews in Russian (Уповноважений із захисту державної мови 2021a). Later that same month, Kremin invited the Ukrainian Olympic national team to use exclusively Ukrainian at the official events during the Tokyo Olympic Games (Уповноважений із захисту державної мови 2021b). Prior to Kremin’s statements, in May 2021, Vadym Hutsait, the Minister of Youth and Sports of Ukraine, asserted that language choice was an issue of each athlete (Мороз 2021). However, the full-scale invasion prompted the minister, who initially identified himself as a Russian speaker, to shift to Ukrainian. At the all-Ukrainian forum “Ukrainian – language of victory”, he underscored it as an important marker of the Ukrainian identity despite the historical dominance of Russian in Ukrainian sports (Єдині 2022).

Like Ukrainian soccer players in 2021, some athletes have been criticized for the use of Russian in public. Generally speaking, such criticism of speaking Russian is observed online rather than face-to-face (Kulyk 2024, 160). Judoka Daria Bilodid was virtually attacked for her Instagram post in Russian after receiving a bronze medal at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 (Товт, Пронина 2021). More recently, on April 12 2024, tennis patron Iurii Sapronov commentated in Russian the match between Ukraine and Romania at the Billie Jean King Cup in the Ukrainian sports channel Setanta Sports. Although during the match, he apologized in Ukrainian thrice

that he was still learning the language and could not commentate on the tournament in Ukrainian, he was suspended from commentating further due to complaints from the Internet audience (Приходько 2024). This incident clearly demonstrates that the use of Russian in public communication in present-day Ukraine is undesirable, particularly in sports, where Ukraine is internationally represented, and the use of Ukrainian is perceived as more than appropriate.

Athletes are conscious that such a criticism exists and typically point out that Ukrainian is their mother tongue, but speaking Russian is more convenient in everyday life because they think in Russian. Others have stated their readiness to adjust their language in favour of a conversation partner. Some athletes challenge the ideology “Language matters” that a patriotic Ukrainian should speak Ukrainian: “If you are wearing vyshyvanka, you are a patriot. If you speak Russian, you are not. I have many friends who speak Russian and they are more patriotic than many of those wearing vyshyvanka” [Mykola Morozuk, soccer player] (Champion 2020). Such athletes’ comments, as counterarguments to the “Language matters” ideology, may be featured as separate articles in the media and are likely to evoke new criticism against the “Language does not matter” ideology.

Wartime inherently politicizes sports. Russia’s full-blown invasion of Ukraine has heavily impacted both Ukrainian and Russian sports. The Russian slogan *Sport vne politiki* ‘Sports out of politics’ has often been invoked in Russian sports discourse to oppose sanctions banning Russian athletes to compete at international competitions. However, it not only fails to disassociate sports from politics but also underscores their intersection. In this context, the Ukrainian slogan *Sport ne mozhe buti poza politykoyu* ‘Sports cannot be out of politics’, articulated in Ukrainian sports discourse, reflects the reality of the situation. Elite athletes themselves are keenly aware of this reality: “Athletes are political figures because they are the face of their country and represent the entire nation”¹ [Maryna Bekh-Romanchuk, long jumper and triple jumper] (Орошкевич 2023).

The war has significantly influenced Ukrainian sports discourse with the conceptual metaphor of SPORT IS WAR (Kövecses 2010, 85). In the wartime Ukrainian society discourse, alongside with adjectives such as *informatsiyni* ‘information’, *dyplomatychnyi* ‘diplomatic’, *movnyi* ‘linguistic’, *kulturnyi* ‘cultural’, *humanitarnyi* ‘humanitarian’, *naukovyi* ‘scientific’, the adjective *sportyvnyj* ‘sports’ is deservedly used with the noun *front* ‘frontline’. Thus *sportyvnyi front* ‘sports frontline’ emerges as a symbol of the nation’s presence on the international sports

¹ All quotations from athletes and coaches both in written texts and video materials are translated by the author from Ukrainian, unless flagged as translation from Russian.

stage. Ukrainian athletes perceive their athletic endeavours as acts on this metaphorical frontline in sports: “We fight on our own frontline, representing our country to the whole world” [Oksana Livach, freestyle wrestler] (Кулачковська 2022). The term ‘frontline’ is also used in reference to the campaign *Sportyvnyi front* ‘Sports Frontline’, introduced in June 2022, by the media group 1+1, with the aim of excluding Russian and Belarusian athletes from international competitions. Thus, today Ukrainian athletes, especially those who currently represent the country internationally, display an enhanced sense of patriotism.

In general, athletes’ discourse encompasses a range of topics, including sports-related matters such as competitions and training, as well as non-sports-related subjects such as private life and socio-political problems. As can be seen later in this research, language issues such as language attitude and behaviour, which are not inherently linked to sports-specific topics, have become increasingly intertwined with discussions surrounding the impact of the war in Ukrainian sports media. This includes reflections on what athletes witnessed and experienced on February 24, 2022, rethinking the meaning of sport, their training regimens during wartime conditions, gratitude to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and their sentiments toward Russian and Belarusian athletes who supported the war or remained silent. For foreign media, Ukrainian athletes complement these topics with a reminder to the world that the war in Ukraine is continuing.

The high level of interest in language issues in present-day Ukraine can be observed in how they are featured in the media. Even when sports-related issues are quantitatively dominant in an interview, the language issues, which are discussed just in some sentences throughout the interview, are highlighted in the headlines as if it was qualitatively the most important part of the interview, since it may call readers’ attention and aligns with interest of the society: “Orest Kuzyk: Almost all Odesa shifted to Ukrainian” (UA Футбол 2023).

3. Method and data

The analysed dataset consisted of language-related comments given in Ukrainian and Russian by Ukrainian sports figures. Most of the commenters were athletes, although retired athletes, coaches and sports officials were also included in the analysis.

The analysis used main Ukrainian sports websites and websites of some Ukrainian sports federations, with the keywords such as *ukrainska/ukrainsku/ukrainskoiu* ‘Ukrainian (nominative/accusative/instrumental)’, *rozmovliati/hovoryty* ‘speak’, *pereiti/perekhodyti* ‘shift’, *mova/movu/movoju* ‘language (nominative/accusative/instrumental)’ to extract texts containing

language-related issues. Additionally, Google search engine was used with the names of Ukrainian athletes in their Ukrainian spelling along with the aforementioned keywords. For the purpose of searching athletes, the member lists of the Ukrainian national team for Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Beijing 2022 Olympics were referred to (Міністерство молоді та спорту України 2021; Міністерство молоді та спорту України 2022). The language-related keywords do not always yield texts with metalinguistic comments. For example, the word *mova* ‘language’ is used in idioms like *znaiti spilnu movu* ‘find a common language’ or *mova ide pro ...* ‘the issue is that...’. Therefore texts irrelevant to this research were excluded from the analysis. Materials also include athletes’ accounts on social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram), since they are as influential as sports media and their posts often become sources for separate articles in sports media. For audiovisual materials, the same search method was applied as to YouTube channels, focusing on videos or descriptions that contained relevant keywords. When available, the video chapter function was used to locate language-related parts of the video. Additionally, some video interviews featuring Ukrainian athletes were randomly selected and reviewed until language-related issues were found.

The language-related issues analysed in this paper concern only Ukrainian and Russian. Articles where Ukrainian athletes, especially soccer players playing abroad, talk about their experience of learning foreign languages have not been examined, although this could be a separate research subject (cf. Lavric and Steiner 2017). The way foreign athletes such as soccer players in Ukraine and foreign coaches working with Ukrainian athletes learn Ukrainian and communicate with Ukrainian teammates or athletes is also of particular interest. However, such episodes were excluded from the analysis.

This research analysed 127 textual and 31 audiovisual units comprising language-related comments made by 103 Ukrainian sports figures (82 males and 21 females), including 14 coaches and 7 sports officials. 21 disciplines are represented by 45 people (soccer), 14 (basketball), 6 (boxing), 5 (tennis), 4 (athletics, biathlon, ice hockey), 3 (artistic swimming, rhythmic gymnastics), 2 (artistic gymnastics, fencing, judo), 1 (cybersports, chess, figure skating, freestyle, handball, karate, volleyball, weightlifting, wrestling). 54 of these can be categorized as active athletes conventionally, since not all athletes clearly announce the end of their carrier, and even a retired athlete may be presented as “athlete” or “soccer player” without clarifying the designation as “retired”, “former” or “ex-”. Thus, this categorization was based on their activities during the 2023/2024 season. The average birth year of active athletes is 1993. Some of them are current and former members of the national team, while others are pursuing their carriers in domestic and foreign sport clubs. Many language-related comments made by

soccer players can be explained by their conspicuous popularity and massive media coverage in Ukraine. Some sites provided the same text both in Ukrainian and Russian, making it difficult to identify the original language. In that case, the Ukrainian version was used. As shown in Table 1, the most of analysed written texts and videos comprising sports figures' language-related comments were published in 2022 and 2023. All the texts in 2022 were published after February 24, and texts in 2024 cover the period up to the end of April. Most of comments are found in interviews and as citations by journalists.

Table 1: Distribution of analysed materials containing sports figures' language-related comments by year of publication

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Texts	1	1	4	4	10	19	42	36	10
Videos	0	0	1	0	1	0	11	14	0

It must be noted that the textual material may not fully reflect what athletes literally pronounced. Athletes' comments are formally edited by journalists and elaborated in clear Ukrainian, even when an athlete, originally Russian-speaking, inserts Russian words or speaks Ukrainian with a Russian influence. The thumbnail and headline of retired basketball player Serhii Lishchuk's interview says *Zaraz soromno rozmovlyaty rosiiskoiu movoiu* 'Now it is shameful to speak Russian' (Kamp-Sport 2022). However, in the video, he uses the Russian word *styžno* instead of *soromno*, and Russian-like prepositional construction *na rosiiskii movi* (cf. Russian *na russkom iazyke*) instead of Ukrainian instrumental adverbial *rossiiskoiu movoiu*. The video of originally Russian-speaking athletes who speak Ukrainian in the media also shows their discursive actions, such as recasting and self-correction. Maryna Aleksiiwa, an artistic swimmer, used to speak Russian in the media earlier, and without publicly announcing her linguistic shift, has been speaking Ukrainian in her interviews after February 2022. During one of her interviews (Ukrainian synchronized swimming 2022), she was close to using the Russian *voobshche* 'in general' and started to pronounce the first syllables *voob*, but replaced it with the Ukrainian equivalent *vzahali*. Thus, the peculiarities of Ukrainian usage by Russian-speaking athletes are often not fully reflected in written texts due to journalistic mediation. Nevertheless, the primary research materials are written texts, as they are more convenient for searching and analysis.

4. Language issues in wartime Ukrainian sports media

The most significant language issue in Ukrainian sports media during wartime is the linguistic shift from Russian to Ukrainian among Russian-speaking Ukrainian athletes. This shift is driven by a heightened sense of Ukrainian identity, which aligns with the language ideology “Language matters” (Kulyk 2013; Kulyk 2018; Kulyk 2022; Kulyk 2024; Bilaniuk 2020; Seals 2020). Comments in favour of the opposite ideology are much less attested.

4.1. Language shift from Russian to Ukrainian

In Ukrainian media, it was quite common to see athletes being interviewed in Ukrainian but responding to questions in Russian, although they might start the conversation with a greeting in Ukrainian, or conversely in Russian as if to signal their preference for speaking Russian. This is an example of non-accommodating bilingualism, where individuals use the language they prefer (Bilaniuk 2016, 139). Since the outbreak of the full-scale war, an increasing number of athletes who previously spoke Russian in the media, including social media, have begun to use Ukrainian. Even some coaches, who are older than athletes and have spoken Russian throughout their lives, now attempt to speak Ukrainian, often with noticeable difficulties, at least responding to the first questions in their interviews.

Not all public figures who previously spoke Russian in the media and now use Ukrainian announce their language shift or are highlighted by the media for their language choice. The degree and nature of the shift vary among individuals. Some may gradually increase their use of Ukrainian and continue to speak Russian, accommodating to an interlocutor: “I don’t refuse Russian, because it is a part of me. But I am a Ukrainian, and want to speak my native language” [Olha Kharlan, fencer] (Zhdanovich 2022). Abandoning the language that they are accustomed to using is indeed not easy, as language is a tool of interaction with others. Changing the language naturally involves others and may prompt them to reconsider which language to use. Publicly announcing a linguistic change brings a certain responsibility for them to fulfil their commitments. Such announcements could be interpreted as a political statement, which some may consider to be a private matter.

Since 2022, at least 31 sports figures have explicitly announced their language shift from Russian to Ukrainian or been featured in the media, compared to 8 figures before 2022.

Table 2: Ukrainian sports figures who explicitly announced their shift to Ukrainian by the year of media texts publication

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Sports figures	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	4	23	5	3

It is noteworthy that language issues are typically observed in the comments of athletes who predominantly speak Russian. Among those who publicly announced their shift to Ukrainian, the youngest athletes were born in 2003. This suggests that for athletes who primarily speak Ukrainian or both languages, and those from younger generations, proficiency and daily use of Ukrainian are so ingrained that they may not feel the need to explain their language use and attitudes after language issues were highlighted by the outbreak of the full-scale war.

The extent to which athletes try to influence others to shift their language varies. One group encourages society to speak Ukrainian, another views it as a private decision, and a third provides no comment on others' language choices. As to the first group, athletes, as influential public figures, contribute to linguistic dynamics in Ukrainian society. For instance, gymnast Oleh Verniaiev and retired rhythmic gymnast and current aerobics coach Anita Lutsenko were named ambassadors of the all-national project *Iedyni* 'United', aimed at helping people shift from Russian to Ukrainian. Soccer fans reacted positively to coach Petrakov's decision to speak Ukrainian by holding a banner "Ukrainian is the mother tongue, follow an example of Petrakov" (Футбол 24 2021b).

Athletes' discourse regarding their language shift typically reflects positive attitudes toward Ukrainian, explanations of their linguistic and geographic backgrounds, and the difficulties encountered during the shift.

Athletes, when announcing their shift, emphasize their belonging to Ukraine: "I know Ukrainian, we speak Ukrainian, but I myself am from the Donetsk region, so Russian is more familiar to me. But I am completely Ukrainian, I respect my country and language" [Oleksii Torokhtii, weightlifter] (Чеканов 2022). Athletes often use verbs such as *povazhaty* 'respect' and *liubty* 'love' to embrace the country and language. Ukrainian language is referred to in an affectionate manner as *ridna mova* 'native language' or *nasha mova* 'our language'. Athletes describe their efforts to speak Ukrainian using verbs such as *namahatysia* 'make an effort' or *staratysia* 'strive', followed by *hovoryty/rozmovliaty* 'speak' or *spilkuvatysia* 'communicate'. Some athletes express emotional attachment to the language, describing it as *harna* 'beautiful' or *krasyva* 'beautiful'. When it comes to characterizing the language based on its auditory appeal,

athletes use clearer descriptors: *spivucha* ‘singing’, *mylozvychna* ‘euphonious’, aligning with the traditional epithet of the Ukrainian language *solov’ina* ‘nightingale’.

The announcement of their linguistic shift typically includes details about their linguistic backgrounds. For instance, mentioning whether athletes attended the Ukrainian or Russian school is contrasted with whether they previously speak Ukrainian or not. It may be also emphasized that some athletes find it easier to transition to Ukrainian because of their schooling background, compared to those who attended Russian schools. Additionally, details about the language spoken at home are provided: “I switched to Ukrainian with my family in 2014. Before that, no one spoke Ukrainian in our family, even though I graduated from a Ukrainian school in Kyiv” [Serhii Stakhovskiy, tennis player] (Пастернак 2022); “I began shifting from the start of the full-scale invasion. However, it’s important to note that we had Ukrainian-language schools in Mariupol. Nowadays, there’s a common belief that only Russian was taught. But I attended a Ukrainian school, and we also had Ukrainian universities. So, it wasn’t difficult for me when I made the switch” [Dmytro Shynkarenko, soccer player] (Безсонова 2024).

Athletes specify their geographical backgrounds from Russian-dominant areas such as Donetsk, Kharkiv, Odesa, Mykolaiv, Mariupol, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Simferopol. High jumper Iaroslava Mahuchikh was observed speaking mainly Russian in her interviews around 2018 but has been speaking Ukrainian in the media in recent years without an explicit announcement of her language choice. In one of her interviews, she mentioned Ukrainians’ linguistic shift triggered by the war. The interviewer assumed that she used to speak mostly Russian but now she also shifted to Ukrainian. She does not provide a clear answer regarding her own linguistic shift in this interview or in the others. She explains her background and, although it is not fully clear how the fact that her city had the status of a closed city during the Soviet era is relevant here, she implies that Dnipro is predominantly a Russian-speaking city, at the same time contrasting herself with the older generation who find it harder to speak Ukrainian:

Interviewer: You also shifted to Ukrainian.

Mahuchikh: I speak Ukrainian, maybe sometimes in Russian. Because Dnipro used to be a closed city, and until the older generation they didn’t learn Ukrainian at all. It is difficult for them to shift.

(Бомбардир 2023)

In contrast, Lviv, Rivne, Khmelnytskyi and Lutsk, cities regarded as predominantly Ukrainian-speaking, are mentioned by athletes and journalists when athletes from Russian-

speaking regions come to play or train in the western region of the country and are asked about their adaptation to local life. “I speak Ukrainian, I can switch to it, but my family is Russian-speaking. I travel all over Ukraine, I often visit Lviv too, and in my entire life I have never heard complaints about why I communicate in Russian” [Zakhar Denysov, handball player] (Федерація гандболу України 2022). Here, Lviv is separately mentioned as the most representative Ukrainian-speaking city. “I really like Lutsk. To be honest, people and atmosphere here made me fall in love with them. So I didn’t need time for any long adaptation. I arrived and enjoyed myself from the first day. It is hard for me to speak Ukrainian, but I also liked the fact that no one shamed me for it” [Panfilov Kyrylo, basketball player] (Мошкун 2024). It is noteworthy that both athletes mentioned they never felt any problem speaking Russian there. Athletes’ discourse related to the language shift may not differ to a great extent from the one usually shared by non-athletes (Bilaniuk 2020). The need to overcome fear of making mistakes, the desire to speak fluent and clear Ukrainian and the need to support conversation partners, commonly mentioned in language-shifting discourse, are also present in athletes’ discourse. A rejection of language perfectionism is also expressed: “My wife told me to go to a tutor because I would have to speak Ukrainian. I answered her: if it is necessary – I will. As my Ukrainian is, so it will be. It may have mistakes, it may not be pretty, but it’s mine. That’s all. Everything is very simple. You can laugh at me – I don’t care” [Ievhen Selezniiov, soccer player] (ПроФутбол Digital 2023).

Athletes experience also sports-specific episodes. Usually, even when athletes announce their linguistic shift, they do not talk in detail about how they interact with teammates or coaches: “Now we try to speak Ukrainian with the girls as often as possible in the team” [Marta Fiedina, artistic swimmer] (Орошкевич 2022); “Speaking about this year, I hear more and more dialogues in Ukrainian. Yes, Russian is present in the work process, but there is more and more Ukrainian, and I am sure it will become more and more” [Oleksandr Hlyvinskyi, press-secretary of the national soccer team] (УА Футбол 2024). The locker room often appears as a place to describe linguistic reality in the team: “In the locker room, yes, we communicate, we give each other tips in Ukrainian. 90% of the communication is in Ukrainian. In the locker room and at all meetings” [Serhii Rebrov, soccer coach] (Радіо Свобода 2023). According to the head coach of the ice hockey national team Dmytro Khrystych, coaches, including an assistant from Canada named Nick, use only Ukrainian in their group chat: “Nick, by the way, is actively learning our language. I welcomed his desire. After all, even if we use Russian in the locker room, a person who knows Ukrainian will understand everything. Only the Russians, like idiots, pretend that they don’t understand either Ukrainian or Belarusian” [Dmytro Khrystych, ice hockey coach]

(Вербицький 2023). Although he implies that they may speak Russian in the locker room, Ukrainian serves to contrast foreigners who learn it with Russian nationals who do not try to understand it. Another athletes-specific episode is shared by the fencer Iana Shemiakina, who encountered a situation when she was addressed in Russian with “Thank you” at a competition abroad: “I was recently at a competition in Turkey. They said ‘Spasibo’ to me. I re-educated them to say: ‘Not Spasibo, but Diakuii’ [Iana Shemiakina, fencer] (Кулай 2022). This episode shows that top athletes representing the country abroad can increase the presence of Ukrainian in international sports and may comply with the general opinion that Ukrainian athletes should speak Ukrainian in international competitions.

The commitment to speaking Ukrainian is motivated also by the alienation of the Russian language, which has been triggered by a negative attitude towards Russia, as the Russian language began to be associated with the aggressor and its military activities: “This is rather a principled position. Because somehow, even inside, it’s unpleasant when you speak the language in which orders are given to kill our people” [Mykhailo Mudryk, soccer player] (Хмельницька 2023). This sentiment is evidenced by several clichés used in wartime Ukrainian discourse regarding the Russian language: *mova okupanta/okupantiv* ‘language of the invader/s’, *mova voroha/vorohiv* or *vorozha mova* ‘language of the enemy/s’, *mova krainy-ahresora* ‘language of the invading country’, and reinforced by a sense of shame *soromno rozmovliati rosiiskoiu* ‘ashamed to speak Russian’.

Since the language is inseparable from culture, athletes also distance themselves from Russian literature and music: “Once this language was close to me, I liked to read the Russian classics, but now I am moving away from it” [Iana Shemiakina, fencer] (Кулай 2022). Russian pop-music is not an exception: “I’ll be honest: before the war, my favourite musician was Basta. Now I don’t have any of his tracks. Deleted everything. I thought he was a man of honour, but it turned out not to be. I listen to Ukrainian music” [Andrii Khokhonyk, basketball player] (БК Запоріжжя 2023).

The head coach of the Ukrainian national artistic swimming team Svitlana Saidova (born in 1954) harshly expressed her outrage toward Russia and announced her plan to study Ukrainian: “And hearing the word Russian now makes me feel sick. I want to forget this country and never remember it, erase it from my life. I’m going to learn Ukrainian. I hate speaking Russian” (translation from Russian) [Svitlana Saidova, artistic swimming coach] (Павлова 2022). However, she continues to speak Russian in her video interviews until 2024: her original utterances in Russian are voice-overed in Ukrainian or accompanied by Ukrainian subtitles. Her

example shows that commitment to linguistic engagement to speak Ukrainian or learn it may be driven by emotions, but not everyone is ready to use Ukrainian, at least in the media.

Some athletes shared others' posts and discard Russian narratives. Kateryna Reznik, an artistic swimmer, articulates lexical affinity of Ukrainian with Western Slavic languages, thus rejecting the Russian narrative of "brotherhood between two peoples": "A few years ago, my friends and I, in an international dialogue, came to the conclusion that the people of Czechia and Poland are more brothers to us than those who have now come to our lands. The language differences confirm this!" (translation from Russian) [Kateryna Reznik, artistic swimmer] (Резник 2022). For tennis player Marta Kostiuk, sharing Russia's official news about compatriots united by the Russian language, says that Ukrainian may serve as a means to distance oneself from Russia's narrative: "We learn and shift to our native language in order not to suddenly become 'compatriots'" [Marta Kostiuk, tennis player] (Костюк 2022). In her Ukrainian text, she writes the Russian word *sootechestvenniki* 'compatriots', though in Ukrainian spelling, to demonstrate that it is a citation from the Russian narrative.

4.2. "Language does not matter" ideology

Language is not deemed crucial by some athletes in determining Ukrainian patriotism: "What difference does it make what language is spoken by a person who loves Ukraine and helps as much as he can? Even if it's Chinese!" (translation from Russian) [Anzhelika Terliuha, karateka] (Терлюга 2022). However, today this view is far less common as to its opposite. Only 6 athletes gave comments aligned with the "Language does not matter" ideology: 2 before the outbreak of the war and 4 after it. Of the latter group, 3 comments were made by soccer players who protested against political activist Iryna Farion's harsh criticism of Russian-speaking Ukrainian soldiers. For the "Language does not matter" ideology, the presence of Russian-speaking soldiers fighting for Ukraine against Russia is often considered as a counter-discourse (Bilaniuk 2020, 66; Seals 2020, 173-174). This argument is exemplified: "I and my children will honour and thank them, regardless of the language in which they protect us" [Roman Zozulia, soccer player] (Зозуля 2023); "I do not think that it is so important to speak Ukrainian now. You need to have your own position. And many soldiers who are fighting – many of them speak Russian. I don't see any problem in this" [Artem Milevskyi, soccer player] (Глухенький 2023). Former soccer player Oleksandr Aliiev, a Russian native born in Khabarovsk and now serving in the Ukrainian Forces, stated in Russian: "Listen, a lot of guys on the front line speak Russian. (...) You can sit calmly and chat now, while our guys are dying over there. What right do you have to talk at the guys who are defending our country from Russian evil spirits? (...) You didn't

cuckoo anything on the 24th. So think about it. Glory to Ukraine. Glory to the Armed Forces” [Oleksandr Aliiev, soccer player] (translation from Russian) (Aliiev 2023). Aliiev thus underscores the irrelevance of language in the context of the larger struggle against Russian aggression to state that language does not matter compared to the lives of compatriots

4.3. Language choice and practice in media

Language choice in certain situations may be dictated not by athletes themselves, but by national federations or clubs which they belong to. National federations of certain sports may request athletes to speak Ukrainian at press conferences, which are considered more formal than their interviews conducted in the media. In an interview with basketball player Roman Morozov, the journalist mentioned that the Ukrainian Basketball Federation recommends players to provide comments in Ukrainian during press conferences. Morozov responded: “I know Ukrainian, I learned it at school. At the next press conferences, you will hear that I will be speaking Ukrainian” [Roman Morozov, basketball player] (БК Запоріжжя 2022). Contrarily, the basketball player Anton Buts, responding to the question why he has not been at the press conference during the season, explained: “Press conferences are stressful for me. My Ukrainian is not as good as I would like, so I asked the coach not to take me” [Anton Buts, basketball player] (БК Запоріжжя 2024). His comment suggests that athletes who lack confidence in their Ukrainian proficiency may struggle with the pressure to speak Ukrainian in public and may opt to avoid speaking in the media.

Language choice and practice by athletes are highlighted by journalists in the media. Interviewers, aware that the interviewees have predominantly spoken Russian, may positively comment on their proficiency in Ukrainian. Dmytro Khrystych, ice hockey coach, was asked in an interview: “By the way, the journalists who were present at your presentation as the head coach of the national team noticed with some surprise that you speak Ukrainian very well” (Вербицький 2023). Khrystych responded by explaining that it was not surprising at all, because he used to speak Ukrainian or Surzhyk, when he visited his grandmother in Poltavshchyna, and critically added that being a child, he wondered why Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine was a Russian-speaking city.

In terms of the interview structure, comments on an athlete’s Ukrainian language proficiency can be weaved in any part of the interview. However, the interviewers may point it out at the very end of the video interviews as well. This reveals that the athlete’s language use throughout the interview depended on contextual factors, and the last part of the interview can be seen as a “behind the scenes” moment. For example, after consistently speaking Ukrainian

throughout the interview, judoka Heorhii Zantaraia made his final statement in Russian, indicating that speaking Ukrainian requires effort and making this part of the interview a backstage scene.

Interviewer: In general, it is good that you speak Ukrainian because I know you as a Russian speaker, and hearing Ukrainian from you is (...) The most important thing is making efforts.

Zantaraia: Yes.

Interviewer: And I see it's great.

Zantaraia (in Russian): I'm even sweating.

(Перший 2022)

At the very end of the interview with jumper Iaroslava Mahuchikh, the interviewer commented on her Ukrainian proficiency, although they did not talk about language issues earlier. As the interviewer praised Mahuchikh's Ukrainian, the camera captured her smiling and making a heart gesture with her hands, indicating her appreciation for the compliment.

Interviewer: Iaroslava's Ukrainian is already wonderful, because I compared every interview, and it seems there were no Ruscisms today.

Mahuchikh: Yes.

(Євген Пронін 2023)

The analysis of these episodes suggests that both language choice and practice are not always transparent, but can be highlighted by journalists, regardless of the interviewee's intentions.

Language is not a typical topic in sports and may not be always a crucial factor in athletic performance. Audiences primarily focus on athlete's performance. In some sports, language is not even a component of the performance itself. Consequently, what language the athletes and coaches use during everyday training and competitions often escapes media attention or remains indiscernible because of lack of access to their training environments. However, the degree of mediatization and popularity of each sport can influence how media feature athletes in terms of their language attitudes. In this aspect, Ukrainian soccer players are most likely featured in both sports and private life, as well as in terms of language attitudes and behaviour. With regard to popularity, soccer is followed by other well commercialized sports, such as boxing, tennis and basketball. Representatives of these sports may face greater pressure to align with the dominant ideology of speaking Ukrainian, at least in public communication, and are more likely to articulate their language attitudes.

Within highly commercialized sports, language can still play a significant role, for example, in cybersports: although Russian has been the preferred language in post-Soviet countries, there is a growing trend towards popularizing Ukrainian in cybersports events and content (Mazyp 2021). Professional clubs and popular or well-sponsored athletes are engaged in cultivating a positive self-image. Here, it is noteworthy to mention a video published by the professional soccer club “Zoria Luhansk” on the symbolic date of February 24 2023 (Zoryaluhansk 2023). In this video, “Zaria Lugansk” in Russian changes to the Ukrainian “Zoria Luhansk”, accompanied with the patriotic song “Manifest” by Artem Pyvovarov. It serves as more than just an example of the strong alignment between language and national identity. However, it can be also interpreted as a strategic move towards rebranding the club. Comparatively, language matters much more in show business where audience size and language play crucial roles, particularly in music, TV programs and movie. For example, Ukrainian pop singer Svitlana Loboda announced that she would not refuse to sing in Russian for her Russian-speaking audiences both in Ukraine and abroad (BBC News – Русская служба 2023), which was perceived with controversy. This reveals a different relationship between language and audience engagement in sports and show business, which requires a separate further analysis.

5. Conclusions

Although language is not an essential topic in sports itself or sports media, language issues were present in the Ukrainian sports media before the full-scale war. After the outbreak of the war, they have become more closely associated with war-related topics. Athletes’ discourse regarding their language shift from Russian to Ukrainian typically reflect their embrace of Ukrainian, explanations of their linguistic backgrounds, rethinking of its role in patriotism, and distance themselves from Russian. Publicly announcing the language shift from Russian to Ukrainian may be a wartime trend and might not persist after the war, regardless of its outcome. Given an influential role of sport and sports figures in modern life and their media representation, sports figures play a part in reinforcing the language ideology “Language matters” on the one hand. On the other hand, sports figures as public figures may be concerned with their media perception, which potentially makes them more susceptible to conforming mainstream ideologies to gain social approval or avoid social disapproval. This aspect requires further examination. Nevertheless, athletes’ comments provide valuable insights to the sociolinguistic dynamics in today’s Ukraine.

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