

# **The Role of Language in Religion and Ethnic Identity**

## **A Study of Liturgical Language Use in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada**

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The Ukrainians who immigrated to North America had experienced ethnic, religious, and linguistic persecution in their homeland from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onward by neighbouring empires, and in recent memory most notably by the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. As immigrants, they left their ancestral land seeking freedom to develop their own ethnic identity, and to preserve their cultural heritage. At the level of cultural politics, in Canada they encountered a situation too similar to the one they had left. While not completely oppressive, the Canadian government and religious hierarchical structures, both Catholic and Orthodox, did not allow the Ukrainians to operate as freely as they desired. Language policy in Canada has always involved the promotion of the two official languages, English and French. The support of other languages in society, especially within education, has normally been discouraged by government policy, though not forbidden.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Alberta's education policy, which prohibited instruction in languages other than English and French for the greater part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In spite of the constant pressures to assimilate into the dominant society of Canada, the Ukrainian immigrants settled in ethnic pockets and strove to maintain their own cultural heritage, and identity in hopes that they could one day return to a free Ukraine. However, the descendants of these immigrants have been assimilating into the dominant culture generation by generation. The rate of transmission of the Ukrainian language from one generation to the next has been steadily falling to the point when in the 1986 Canadian Census, only 2.6% of children (0-14 years of age) claiming Ukrainian ethnicity also declared Ukrainian as their mother tongue.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada has had to face the question of which language is most appropriate to use in the religious context. There are strong voices advocating that Ukrainian alone should be used in the religious domain. Others, equally strong, advocate the use of English. This debate has caused some congregations to incorporate English into the services, using a mixture of both languages in order to facilitate comprehension for all members.

## Two Relevant Case Studies

### *First Century Palestine*<sup>3</sup>

First century Palestine was a multilingual political hotbed. The Jewish people had an ancestral and sacred Hebrew language, but Hebrew was no longer spoken on a common or daily basis. It was the language of the Holy Scriptures, not of the marketplace. Instead, many of the Jewish people in Palestine spoke Aramaic – a language they adopted during their captivity in Persia – but there were also differences between northern (Galilean) and southern (Judean) Aramaic. Neither was Aramaic the only

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<sup>2</sup> Harrison, Brian and Rejean Lachapelle. 1986. *Measures of Mother Tongue Vitality for Non-Official Languages in Canada*. Ottawa: Language Studies, Analytical Studies Branch, Statistics Canada. p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> This section is influenced largely by the following article by Barbara F. Grimes, “Language Choice in First Century Christianity.” *Notes on Literature in Use and Language Programs* 12: 20–32. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, Inc. 1987.

language spoken by the Jews. The Jews of the Levant spoke Coptic and the Jews of the Diaspora spoke Koine (or *common*) Greek. There were also Hellenizing Jews: those who resided in Palestine, but who spoke Greek in addition to Aramaic and who resided mostly in the northern regions.

The Jewish Scriptures had been preserved in Hebrew for millennia. Translating and proclaiming the holy words in any language other than Hebrew was out of the question for the religious leaders. However, they also recognized the importance of explaining the texts to those who could not understand the Hebrew language. It, therefore, became tradition to read the texts in Hebrew and then to have an oral translation called a Targum (plural: Targumim) proclaimed, and then explained in Aramaic so that the people could understand.

The advent of the Greek Jewish Scriptures was also a favourable event for the Greek-speaking Jews, and Gentile converts to the Jewish faith.<sup>4</sup> Although only Hebrew could be used in regular synagogues, Greek translations were permitted to be used in Hellenic synagogues. These Greek translations also provided a basis for the Christian efforts at evangelism throughout the Mediterranean basin. Latin was also present at this time but was used primarily by the Roman officials and soldiers and was not widespread until later on.<sup>5</sup>

The Jews chose to address this multilingual problem by transmitting the historical language (Hebrew) in a scholarly atmosphere, and explaining the faith in synagogues in the local common language (Aramaic

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek Scriptures are often referred to as the Septuagint, although that implies that there was only one translation when in fact there were many manuscripts and translations prior to the formalization of one canon of Old Testament Scripture (in Greek) which was a product of the Christian Church and occurred alongside of (though not in direct communication with) the development of the Jewish canon (in Hebrew) by the Jewish community.

<sup>5</sup> As the use of Latin increased, a Latin translation was completed for the Christian Church and is called the Vulgate, gaining its name from the Latin root *vulgar*: common, ordinary or usual. The Vulgate was used in the Roman Catholic Church almost exclusively until the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the Ukrainian Catholic Church is one notable exception where the mother tongue was permitted) and is still used in some parishes and in the Vatican City.

or Greek). The early Christians chose to maintain the use of Hebrew among those who already understood it, but primarily used the language(s) of the people. Their encyclical letters and Gospels were written in Greek with Hebrew and Aramaic influence (some of which are explained directly in the texts). The use of Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Roman Empire at that time, also enabled the Christian message to be understood by as many people as possible with as little translation work as possible.<sup>6</sup>

Within the context of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use of the Ukrainian language mirrors the use of the Hebrew language in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Middle East in many ways. Ukrainian is viewed highly as the language of the forefathers, the sacred language, by which religious tradition has been passed on both in academic environments, such as seminaries, and in community worship. Like the Jewish community 20 centuries ago, the Ukrainian community has found that incorporating the new *lingua franca* is necessary for comprehension, but abandoning Ukrainian is not desirable. In contrast with the early Church, which was evangelistically driven and therefore focused on spreading the message to multiple linguistic communities (hence, translation was common), the Ukrainian Church has strived to minister primarily to Ukrainians thus reducing the felt need for translation. The increasing decline of Ukrainian language ability among those of Ukrainian ancestry now requires that either the use of English must increase or Ukrainians must learn Ukrainian fluently, in order for the Church to minister to its target audience.

### *The Aboriginal People of North America*

The Aboriginal peoples of North America have faced the prospect, and effects of linguistic, and cultural genocide ever since the white man arrived in the New World. They were the first victims of the American and Canadian governments' English-only policies. Now, many of the Aboriginal

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<sup>6</sup> Early manuscripts do indicate that translation into mother tongue was not avoided, since we have evidence of manuscripts in Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Coptic, and Ge'ez from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onward.

languages are no longer spoken, and more are on the brink of extinction. Scott Palmer sought to find a sociolinguistic answer to the question, *why?*<sup>7</sup> He observes that different people groups have had different historical experiences, and yet they are all facing language decline and loss. The unifying factor, according to Palmer, is that the language of the workforce has prevailed. Loving parents who want their children to succeed in life try to prepare them for that world. Usually, this involves teaching the children the language of majority, of education or of the labour force. In Canada and the United States, English fills all three of these needs. As a result, the ancestral languages suffer. According to Palmer,

If each generation passes on the language to the next, it lives. If it does not, the language will die. This is a family matter. At heart, it is about what language parents use when speaking to their children...<sup>8</sup>

Palmer's theory seems to explain, at least in part, why communities adopt the use of English. It does not fully explain why their languages suffer as a result. He does note the parallel between immigrants who experience language attrition after two to three generations with the noted difference that an immigrant can expect to learn a new language when they arrive in a new country whereas an aboriginal community does not expect to lose their language, having never moved away from their ancestral home.

However, no matter what reasons are responsible for the diminishing use of an ancestral language, the mourning of its loss remains the same. Mark Abley has recorded conversations with people from many endangered languages.<sup>9</sup> The following comments were made in regards to the loss of Native American languages:

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<sup>7</sup> Palmer, Scott. 1996. "The Language of Work, and the Decline of North American languages." *Notes on Literature in Use and Language Programs* 49: 42–63. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, Inc.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Abley, Mark. 2003. *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages*. Toronto: Random House Canada.

For Henderson, it's as if the rhythms and structures of the Mi'kmaq language open a door into the Mi'kmaq world. "To have to speak English," he has said, "is like having to put on a straitjacket."<sup>10</sup>

"...Saving and passing down were all done orally, from generation to generation. But this link was broken when the younger generations didn't learn it. So they switched to English in the church" – regular preaching hasn't been conducted in Yuchi since the 1970's – "and now they want the Yuchi back."<sup>11</sup>

By observing language trends in the United States and Canada, it would appear that the intangible losses will not be recoverable. However, Deborah House has provided a good overview of language shift among the Navajo people, and the efforts that have been made in order to reverse the language shift. While the process is only successful with much effort and desire on the part of the Navajo, the successes they have seen are due to a modified education system which operates according to Navajo philosophies of education, worldviews, and cultural values.

### **Case Study: A Parish of the UOCC**

The experience of the Aboriginal people groups is not identical to the immigrant experience, but some similarities between the two could be identified. Palmer's theory of the language of work is relevant for the immigrants who were required to learn English (or French) fluently in order to attain higher education or to work in the wider work force. As young people moved from the rural communities to cities in order to pursue education and employment, the large companies became more dominant, changing the look of the labour market. As English became more desirable for economic advancement and societal acceptance, Ukrainian lost some of its own desirability.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

In the early years of immigration, the Ukrainian community was somewhat reclusive. The immigrants settled together in rural communities, and preserved as much as they could of their Ukrainian culture and everyday life. They dreamed of the day they could return to Ukraine, and be free from oppressive governments. This dream propelled the preservation of language, religion, cuisine, dance, music and songs, and politics... the whole essence of what it means to be Ukrainian. Canada was a blessing, but for many it was not intended to be a permanent home. As a result, assimilation was resisted.

Years later, a new generation has grown up entirely on Canadian soil. They are third, fourth, fifth, and even sixth generation Canadians. Assimilation has taken place and they are no longer Ukrainian immigrants or Ukrainian refugees, but rather they are Canadians of Ukrainian heritage. The fight to preserve the Ukrainian language has lost some of its zeal among younger members. The decrease in language ability has resulted in a subsequent rejection of historically Ukrainian churches (both Catholic and Orthodox) among many of the younger members, leading to increased discussions among individual congregations regarding the place of both Ukrainian and English within the Church.

In order to take a closer look at the factors, process, and language attitudes involved in this situation, a situation that is all too common among parishes of various ethnicities across North America, a small qualitative and descriptive study was completed at one such parish – identified in this research as St. N's for the sake of anonymity. The scope of the study was limited by time, resources, and a low return-rate of questionnaires. Nonetheless, it was helpful in providing a human element to this question of language use in the Church.

St. N's was studied between September 2006 until June 2007. Research was gathered through observation, questionnaires (distributed to over 100 people), informal interviews (with approximately 20 people), and by studying the existing literature.

St. N's is a large parish located in a bustling metropolitan centre. Average attendance at a Sunday liturgy is between 150-200 people while the parish membership is over 200 people. The membership reflects a variety of ages, both children and adults, with more than half of the members over the age of forty. The congregation represents both immigrants, from various waves of immigration, and children of immigrants; "cradle" Orthodox and converts; bilingual and monolingual speakers;<sup>12</sup> as well as those of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian ethnicity.

## Parish Survey

### Results

#### *Motivation for Incorporating English into the Services*

St. N's Ukrainian Orthodox Church uses both Ukrainian and English in its church services. Through the questionnaire administered, the congregation identified the following reasons for incorporating English into the services.

1. *Comprehension*: The loss of language fluency among those of Ukrainian heritage, especially among the youth, has made the use of English more desirable for overall comprehension.
2. *Mixed marriages*: Non-Ukrainian spouses cannot speak or understand Ukrainian. In order to encourage their attendance, the use of English is necessary. Children of these marriages also have less ability in Ukrainian since it is not spoken between the parents.
3. *Diminishing attendance*: The incorporation of English targets the language needs of the younger generations who have lower levels of fluency in Ukrainian and are choosing to either attend non-Ukrainian churches (in order to meet their language needs, or the needs of their spouses/children) or not to attend church at all.

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<sup>12</sup> Bilingual in this context refers to fluency in English and Ukrainian and does not take into account other fluencies that members may possess.



4. *Religious Transmission*: "Our religion is an integral part of our Ukrainian heritage and culture – our children and grandchildren cannot learn and preserve this culture if they cannot understand the language. Thus the transition into English is vitally important." – Survey Participant.

5. *Politics*: "A *very small*, but politically active group of middle-age families were demanding *more*<sup>13</sup> Ukrainian in order to sustain their perceived loss of culture. English was a backlash to this movement." – Survey Participant.

### *Language Comprehension*

The participants indicated a strong fluency in English, and a moderate fluency in Ukrainian. Ninety-one percent of participants indicated that they understand the liturgy in English. Eighty-two percent of participants indicated that they understand best in English. Thirty-six percent of participants indicated that they do not understand the words of the liturgy in Ukrainian. Thirty-six percent are not content with their level of understanding in the liturgy.

There was overwhelming agreement that understanding the liturgy is very important. Regarding the importance of understanding, one participant wrote the following:

"Sometimes I have mixed feelings about the tradition. I am fluent in both languages. However, I hear Ukrainian spoken only in church so I personally don't mind the whole liturgy given in Ukrainian. However, this is a selfish view and it's not progressive. I remember attending mass in a Roman Catholic Church a way back in 1940. The whole mass was in Latin. It was quite meaningless to me." – Survey Participant.

The problem for this particular parish, and most likely it is not alone in this problem, is that some members have restricted capabilities in English while others have little to no ability in Ukrainian. This poses a

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<sup>13</sup> Emphasis in responses here and below – by participants.

great challenge to the community when congregants agree that it is important to understand what is being said in the services. It is important to understand, but in which language? To this end, 36% of participants agreed either in full or in part that services should be served in Ukrainian whereas 55% disagreed. Seventy-two percent agreed either in full or in part that services should be served in English whereas 18% disagreed. The participants indicated a higher preference for English rather than Ukrainian, but there is clearly no unanimous agreement.

## Outcomes

The topics of language, religion, and culture can strike a deep chord and play on emotions. It is therefore not a surprise to discover that the addition of English has come with challenges. Through the questionnaire, the following challenges were identified:

1. *Translations or willingness to translate:* Although the priest has incorporated English into the services, the responses of the people led by the choir are largely in Ukrainian.
2. *Resistance:* There has been resistance from fluent speakers of Ukrainian, senior citizens, and recent immigrants as well as some young families. Some within these groups do not want any more English added.

To ease these challenges, the following factors were identified as enabling the incorporation to happen more smoothly:

1. Having a bilingual priest.
2. Having support of the people. A survey was taken a few years ago and the results were in favour of having a bilingual liturgy, with about 50% of each language represented.
3. English is widely understood by the parishioners.
4. Declining language ability in Ukrainian, both spoken and written, naturally transitioned to the desire for English.

The following positive and negative outcomes were identified by the participants:

1. *Increased comprehension:*

-“I have begun to understand the services much better and feel more comfortable in my beliefs as an Orthodox Christian.” – Survey Participant.

-“My children understand more about the services and we can discuss them now!” – Survey Participant.

-“Non-Ukrainians of mixed marriages can understand sermon – [they are] not left out.” – Survey Participant.

2. *Attendance:*

Some participants indicated that attendance by younger people, as well as by non-Ukrainian speakers, has increased. Other participants indicated that the growth is minimal, and has not brought back younger members.

3. *Loss of culture:*

-“The richness of my Ukrainian heritage *feels* like it is being “watered-down” by adding more English to my Ukrainian Orthodox Church” – for example, Господи Помилуй<sup>14</sup> sounds much more reverent to my ears than “Lord, have mercy.” – Survey Participant.

-“I believe some parishioners may fear that adding more English sends us sliding more quickly down the slippery slope of losing Ukrainian altogether from our *Ukrainian*<sup>15</sup> Orthodox Church” – Survey Participant.

4. *The use of English decreases the need to learn the Ukrainian Language:*

Ancestral language loss was identified as a negative outcome.

5. *Resistance:*

-“There is continued resistance by Ukrainian fundamentalists.” – Survey Participant.

-“The clergy at all levels are reluctant to this change for fear of loss of culture.” – Survey Participant.

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<sup>14</sup> Господи Помилуй (*Gospodi Pomilui*) – “Lord, have mercy.”

<sup>15</sup> Emphasis here and in other responses – by participants.

## Impact

Despite the challenges they have faced as a congregation and the threat of decreasing Ukrainian language vitality, most participants felt that the incorporation of English has been worthwhile for themselves, and for the parish as a whole because of the outcomes listed above.

## Implications

In the face of increasing pressures to use English in its services, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has faced internal debate over the issue. St. N's has decided to use both Ukrainian and English in the services in order to facilitate comprehension, and religious transmission among Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians alike with the hope that the incorporation of English would increase attendance. They have found that comprehension has increased, but they disagree with regards to whether attendance has increased. The rate of religious transmission was not studied at this time.

The participants agreed that understanding is an important part of a person's faith. The problem lies in the linguistic diversity within the congregation. Some people require Ukrainian in order to understand, while others require English. A higher preference for English, rather than Ukrainian, was indicated by the participants, but there is not unanimous agreement. In this case, it seems that the use of both languages is the most suitable solution for this congregation.

By incorporating English into the services, there has been resistance from fluent speakers of Ukrainian, senior citizens, and recent immigrants as well as a handful of young families. There has also been the practical challenge of translation of materials. Part of this challenge is due to resistance, since English versions of the Ukrainian music are available from outside the community if they are sought out.

The participants found that having a bilingual priest was very helpful in enabling a smooth incorporation of English. It was also noted that the incorporation of English was done with the blessing and desire of the people, and not only the clergy. By abiding by the desires of the people for a bilingual liturgy with the service approximately equally divided between English and Ukrainian,<sup>16</sup> some resistance was prevented. Finally, there is the sense that a decrease in Ukrainian during the services contributes to a loss of culture and that the presence of English decreases the need to learn the Ukrainian language. Overall, the participants felt that the incorporation of English has had a positive effect on the congregation, but they also felt that the maintenance of Ukrainian is very important.

The implications for this community are:

- that a balance of the two languages is currently necessary for comprehension and religious transmission;
- that the community will need to keep the dialogue current in order to meet the needs of its members;
- that finding or creating English copies of the music would be helpful in promoting comprehension and religious transmission;
- that language education should be provided to those who demonstrate a low ability in Ukrainian, e.g. converts, non-Ukrainian spouses, and children, so that they can increase their understanding of the faith.

It is possible that the results of this study apply not only to the congregation of St. N's, but are also representative of other Ukrainian Orthodox Churches, and Orthodox Churches of other ethnicities, across Canada and the United States, the parishes that have been facing the same questions:

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<sup>16</sup> In practice, the amount of each language spoken by the priest is adjusted by the priest at each service to reflect the demographic of the congregation at any given moment. The researcher observed this in action while in attendance at a number of services.

- What language(s) should be used in the services in order to best meet the needs of congregation members?
- How does this decision affect our sense of ethnic identity?
- How does it affect our religious identity?
- How does it affect our church's mission statement/mandate?

It follows that these congregations should seek to approach these questions in love and understanding for their congregants – taking into account both their linguistic and religious needs, which often intertwine.

In doing background research, it was made clear that there is a lack of research in the area of language shift in the religious domain. This study, though small, contributes to the existing research by providing such a case study. Further research could have been conducted at St. N's to gain a fuller picture of the congregation's views and struggles. Research could also be conducted in other Ukrainian Orthodox parishes as well as other Orthodox churches in order to paint a more accurate picture of the situations in these churches today. Perhaps one day this void will be filled.

## **Conclusion**

After the liturgy at St. N's, it is custom for all the people to be invited to the church hall for coffee and visiting. While visiting on one Sunday, I was introduced to two men who expressed great concerns for the Russification of the Ukrainian Church, and of the Ukrainian culture in Ukraine. They also perceive a similar phenomenon taking place in North America: forcing the English language onto the Ukrainian people both inside and outside of the Church.

Given its history, there is no mystery why the Ukrainian community in Alberta and throughout Canada has fought to maintain its sense of identity. They fought very hard to assert their 'Ukrainian-ness' in the face of foreign domination by various powers. With Russification policies in place, they fought to assert that they are *not* Russian, nor will they ever *be* Russian. In their adopted Canadian homeland, they thought they

would be free to simply be Ukrainian in another location, and therefore resisted the repeated pressures to assimilate to the dominant culture, even when marginalized and persecuted for political affiliations. The battle may have changed from one soil to another, but the essence of the battle remains the same: *You cannot change me, I am Ukrainian, and I will fight to remain Ukrainian despite whatever you may do to me or my culture.*

It is surprising that the Ukrainian language has survived through all the trials and oppression over the previous centuries. Its survival points to the tenacity of its speakers who have fought to maintain their culture, language, and identity. For these two men, and for many others, the Ukrainian language is a big part of that identity. To neglect the language is to neglect one's heritage and the essence of one's Ukrainian identity. In fact, one of them indicated that he hails from a long line of Ukrainian-Canadians, and that he speaks both English and Ukrainian fluently. This bilingualism points to the great efforts the language community has made in order to keep their language alive despite the declining number of domains for instrumental usage. Ukrainian is not the language of work or education or prestige. There is no apparent economic or social gain to be made by learning Ukrainian. However, that is not the point. Other language groups around the world have experienced a similar tension when the functionality of the ancestral decreases. A speaker of one of these languages, Manx, commented that:

"I often think it would make sense to give it up," he confessed. "But I never think that I *should*. Everybody has their bad days, of course – if I have a bad day at the plowing match, I think I'll never go plowing again. And I realize there's only so much you can do. I can't stop the Isle of Man I know and love from being changed. But I can influence the way it's being changed. That's why I've latched onto the language in a big way."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Abley, p. 118.

Likewise, the Ukrainian-Canadians cannot prevent external changes or pressures, but they can influence the way their community reacts to them. So the real questions are: Can a Ukrainian Orthodox Church or individual Christian be truly Ukrainian Orthodox if it does not have the Ukrainian language? Can a Ukrainian Orthodox Church (or individual) be truly Orthodox if comprehension is lacking? These questions can only be answered by the Ukrainian Orthodox community, because although other Orthodox believers and other Ukrainians may have their own opinions, it is ultimately the answer of the Ukrainian Orthodox community itself which will determine how the Church will define its mandate, and ultimately define itself in the twenty-first century.

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