

# Language and Language Policy as Instruments for Shaping National Identity

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a philosophical analysis of the interconnection between language, national and personal identity, and the role of the modern Ukrainian elite in the context of Ukraine's language policy. It examines the philosophical aspects of forming national identity through language, the impact of social changes on identity, and the contradictions in the views of various authors on these issues. A novel methodological approach is applied, based on the theoretical and methodological concept of J. Derrida, which demonstrates a transition from the language of identities to the language of differences in both ontological and epistemological dimensions of research. The prioritization of the procedure of differentiation over the search for identity leads to an innovative interpretation of the concept of unity through the combination and coexistence of social diversity. The cultural unity of the nation emerges as a construct founded on the significant presence of diverse subjects that create a shared cultural and political world. Drawing on the works of B. Azhnyuk, V. Kulyk, O. Lytvynchuk, and M. Piren, it analyzes contemporary approaches to understanding language policy, its European foundations, and its influence on Ukraine's state-building processes. The role of the elite in consolidating society and implementing democratic reforms is highlighted, with specific examples and proposals for improving language policy. The article also identifies prospects for further research in this area.

## KEYWORDS

*language, national identity, language policy, personal identity, elite, societal consolidation*

## Introduction

The issues of language and identity are central to national development, state-building, and social unity. In Ukraine, with its multinational composition and complex historical heritage, these questions acquire particular significance (Azhnyuk, 2017: 25). Language is not only a means of communication but also a carrier of culture, history, and the collective memory of the people; it shapes the worldview and influences an individual's self-identification. The state of the language situation is directly connected with essential state-building tasks and the strengthening of national identity.

Contemporary social challenges, such as the events of the Euromaidan and Russian aggression, have led to significant changes in Ukrainian national identity and language policy. A key question is how the modern Ukrainian elite can contribute to the consolidation of society and the implementation of democratic reforms through effective language policy. Studying the phenomenon of identity is important for understanding the sociocultural processes occurring in Ukraine and for determining ways to address existing problems in the field of language policy and identity (Lytvynchuk, 2014: 42).

In modern philosophical and academic literature, identity is considered a multidimensional phenomenon that includes processes of self-awareness, self-determination,

and affiliation with certain social groups. Paul Ricoeur argues that identity is formed through narrative self-construction, where the individual interprets themselves through the history of their own life (Ricoeur, 2002: 65). National identity reflects a sense of belonging to a particular nation, with common historical, cultural, and linguistic features uniting people. According to Charles Taylor, personal identity involves the unique characteristics of an individual—their values, beliefs, and worldview – formed in the context of cultural and social interactions (Taylor, 2005: 48). As a key element of culture, language plays a crucial role in forming both types of identity, transmitting traditions, norms, and values.

The **purpose of the article** is to conduct a philosophical analysis of the influence of language on the formation of cultural and national identity, as well as to identify the role of the modern Ukrainian elite in constructing Ukraine's language policy.

## Research methods

The transition from the language of identities to the language of differences, as described in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida (2000: 17), provides an important methodological tool for this research. Ukrainian scholar M. Kolinko draws attention to "a new perspective – the primacy not of being itself, but of the Difference between Be-



ing and Non-Being. The logic of the philosophy of difference is based on distinction, division, which emerges earlier, is more fundamental, and mediates the introduction of this basic conceptual opposition" (*Kolinko, 2019: 21*). The ontological priority of difference (différance by Derrida) over identity leads to a new concept of unity in sociophilosophical issues (*Derrida, 2000: 22*). Cultural unity, national unity, and political unity emerge as constructs formed by the significant presence of diverse subjects who create a shared cultural and political world.

This research vector is taken up by N. Luhmann, who asserts that algorithms of difference should be perceived not as facts of distinction but as "the self-establishment of sociality through difference" (*Kolinko, 2019: 22-23*). Luhmann's view articulates the system-forming role of language in society, where cultural diversity converges in a single linguistic space.

Relying on poststructuralist studies by J. Derrida, G. Deleuze, and R. Barthes – both a continuation and criticism of structuralism – this article substantiates the thesis of cultural multiplicity and interprets modern mechanisms for constructing national identity. The explorations of post-structuralists contribute to understanding the principles of cultural and political recognition, which form the basis of a nation's right to uniqueness, self-determination, and protecting its existence (*Ricoeur, 2002: 69*).

Methodologically fruitful are the studies of Ukrainian authors. Bohdan Azhnyuk emphasizes the importance of the qualitative state of the titular language and its role in constructing national identity. He notes that Ukraine has inherited a deformed language situation, in which Ukrainian is often perceived as secondary. Azhnyuk analyzes the European foundations of language policy, including the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and their impact on the language situation in Ukraine (*Azhnyuk, 2017: 31*).

Volodymyr Kulyk investigates changes in Ukrainian national identity after the Euromaidan and Russian aggression. He points to the growing priority of national identity and alterations in its content, notably distancing from Russia and increased adherence to Ukrainian nationalism. However, Kulyk notes that most Russian-speaking citizens do not change their linguistic practices, creating challenges for language policy (*Kulyk, 2015: 9*).

Oksana Lytvynchuk analyzes the interaction of social and personal identity, emphasizing their complexity and interrelation. She notes that personal identity is formed amid social changes and interaction with society, where language plays an important role (*Lytvynchuk, 2014: 45*).

Maria Piren examines the problem of national identity among the modern Ukrainian elite as a factor in societal consolidation and democratic reforms. She emphasizes that economic and sociopolitical transformations in Ukrainian society have led to a new ethnopolitical and sociopsychological reality, one feature of which is the identity crisis of the modern managerial and political elite (*Piren, 2012: 15*).

Despite these contributions, the question remains unresolved as to how to balance support for the state language and protect minority language rights, and how language policy and the elite's role can foster societal consolidation amid current challenges.

### Results and Discussion

Language is a key factor in forming national and personal identity (*Ricoeur, 2002: 70; Taylor, 2005: 50*). It is not

only a means of communication but also a carrier of cultural values, historical memory, and worldview orientations. Through language, individuals assimilate traditions, customs, and the mentality of their people, shaping their national consciousness. Personal identity develops in a linguistic environment where language is a means of self-expression and self-determination (*Lytvynchuk, 2014: 46*). In a modern world shaped by globalization and migration, language remains one of the main factors in preserving cultural uniqueness and ensuring intergenerational continuity, while also promoting intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding (*Piren, 2012: 16*).

In Ireland, the revival of the Irish language became a symbol of national rebirth and distinctiveness after a prolonged period of English domination. However, despite significant government efforts, only about 39% of the population can communicate in Irish, and less than 2% use it in everyday life (*Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2016: 2*). This suggests that state support, without considering social realities and motivation, may be insufficient for language revitalization. In Canada, official bilingualism – an outcome of historical compromise – preserves the cultural heritage of both Anglophone and Francophone citizens, influencing their personal and national identity. This bilingual model respects the interests of both linguistic communities, fostering social harmony (*Government of Canada, 2019: 5*).

The elite plays a decisive role in shaping and implementing language policy, acting as a conduit of national values and strategic priorities (*Azhnyuk, 2017: 33*). As holders of power, influence, and intellectual potential, elite members can set the direction of language policy, shape public opinion, and promote societal consolidation around a common linguistic identity. In France, for example, the political and cultural elite actively supports French as the foundation of national identity, enforcing legal acts and initiatives that protect it from foreign language dominance. The 1994 Toubon Law mandates the use of French in official documents, advertising, and education, thus preserving linguistic unity. In Israel, the elite contributed to reviving Hebrew as a modern spoken language—key to forming national consciousness and unity – through comprehensive educational, media, and cultural initiatives that encouraged daily use of Hebrew (*Spolsky, 2014: 222*).

In Ukraine, the elite's role is especially important, considering historical challenges and the necessity of strengthening national identity (*Piren, 2012: 18*). The elite can not only develop and implement effective language policy but also demonstrate respect for the state language by personal example, elevating its prestige in society. According to data from the National Institute for Strategic Studies, after the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion, there was a significant increase in the use of Ukrainian: the proportion of Ukrainians who always speak Ukrainian at home rose from 49% to 58%, and those who consider Ukrainian their native tongue increased to 76% (*National Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023:4*). This indicates the strengthened role of Ukrainian in forming national identity and shows the potential for societal consolidation around it. Through educational, cultural, and media initiatives, the elite can popularize the language, preserve cultural heritage, and cultivate a stable national consciousness. Implementing quotas for Ukrainian on radio and television and supporting Ukrainian cinema and literature enhance the presence of the Ukrainian language in the informational space. During the war with Russia, this is particularly significant, as language becomes not only a cultural but also

a political instrument affecting national security and sovereignty (Kulyk, 2015: 10).

In a globalized world, where linguistic and cultural influences are diverse, a responsible and proactive elite stance is crucial for ensuring linguistic unity, social harmony, and sustainable national development. The elite must consider social realities and citizens' motivations when formulating language policy that strengthens national identity without infringing upon minority rights. Engaging the public in language policy formation, conducting educational campaigns, and creating conditions for a voluntary shift to Ukrainian can be effective measures (Azhnyuk, 2017:35).

All Ukrainian researchers acknowledge the importance of language in shaping identity and the special role of the elite in this process (Kulyk, 2015:9). However, the authors studied offer varying approaches to the connection between language, national identity, and the elite's function, leading to contradictions and highlighting unresolved issues. Bohdan Azhnyuk and Maria Piren stress the need for an active state role in implementing language policy to strengthen the Ukrainian language's position as the state language, viewing this as essential for national unity and societal consolidation. They argue that without state intervention and an elite that exemplifies patriotism and high proficiency in the state language, effectively reinforcing national identity is impossible (Azhnyuk, 2017:36; Piren, 2012:20). In contrast, Oksana Lytvynchuk emphasizes personal freedom in language choice, warning that forced language imposition can violate human rights, harm personal identity, and cause social tension. She believes the elite should encourage the natural development of the linguistic situation, respecting minority language rights and avoiding coercion (Lytvynchuk, 2014: 48).

Contradictions also surface in discussions about balancing linguistic tolerance with national security. Lytvynchuk sees multilingualism and minority language support as culturally enriching and conducive to intercultural dialogue, advocating a tolerant language policy (Lytvynchuk, 2014:49). Volodymyr Kulyk, however, points out that under aggression from a country whose language is widespread in Ukraine, it may be necessary to limit its usage to safeguard national security and counter external influence (Kulyk, 2015:11). These uncertainties raise questions about how to foster the Ukrainian language as the state language without infringing on minority language rights or inciting social conflicts; how the elite can effectively consolidate society around a common linguistic identity without coercion; how state language policy affects the self-identification of citizens, especially those for whom Ukrainian is not native; and what strategies can prevent the language issue from becoming a tool of aggression. Such contradictions underscore the complexity of Ukraine's language problem and the need for a multidimensional approach that seeks compromises and effective language policy mechanisms ensuring social stability and national security (Azhnyuk, 2017:38).

To address these contradictions, we propose applying the principle of differentiation, which helps rethink and construct the identity model necessary for Ukraine's survival and sustainable development. The historical component is indispensable as a foundation for defining national-cultural symbols, traditions, values, and heroes, yet it should be secondary because some symbols, despite seeming significant, may provoke negative reactions and alienation among large segments of the population. Such outcomes adversely affect the sense of unity; thus, when choosing

national symbols, following the "do no harm" principle and considering the percentage of citizens who view a symbol negatively is vital. Identity should rest on pillars impervious to external destabilization. This approach focuses attention on unifying factors that positively influence the sense of community (Piren, 2012:16).

In the context of expanding and strengthening the Ukrainian language's position, applying this method implies that when the government encourages individuals to improve their Ukrainian language skills, such proposals will not trigger internal cultural-value conflicts. Given current realities and the war with Russia, supporting the national language is critical. It must be prioritized in education, media, public administration, and public life (Piren, 2012:17). Educational programs should enhance Ukrainian language proficiency, particularly in regions historically dominated by Russian. Simultaneously, cultural and media initiatives should popularize the Ukrainian language and culture, appealing to youth and various social strata.

At the same time, the rights of national minorities must be taken into account, ensuring the possibility of studying and using their native languages privately and culturally, while cautiously approaching the spread of Russian, the aggressor's language. The Baltic experience demonstrates that consistent state language support can strengthen national identity and sovereignty (Cheskin & Polese, 2016:120). The elite should lead by personal example, promoting Ukrainian and raising its prestige. Developing information security strategies is also essential, considering the potential use of the language issue as a tool of hybrid warfare, aiming at societal consolidation and countering external influence.

### Conclusion

Language is a fundamental factor in shaping national and personal identity, serving not only as a means of communication but also as a carrier of cultural values, historical memory, and worldview orientations. Examples from Ireland, Canada, France, and Israel demonstrate that conscious, purpose-driven language policy can revive a nation, preserve cultural heritage, and consolidate society.

In Ukraine, given historical challenges and the ongoing war with Russia, language policy takes on special importance. The elite's role is decisive in shaping and implementing effective language policy. The elite should not only develop strategies supporting the Ukrainian language but also demonstrate respect for it by personal example, thereby enhancing its prestige in society.

Contradictions in language policy approaches – balancing state intervention with personal freedom, linguistic tolerance with national security – reflect the complexity of the issue. Applying the principle of differentiation can help overcome these contradictions, strengthening the Ukrainian language's positions, increasing its appeal, and respecting minority rights while preventing social conflicts.

Recommendations include developing educational programs, improving Ukrainian language proficiency, and implementing cultural and media initiatives that popularize Ukrainian language and culture. Special attention should be given to regions where Russian has historically dominated, aiming to reinforce national identity and sovereignty. At the same time, it is important to respect minority rights, ensuring the opportunity to study and use their native languages in private and cultural spheres. However, given Russian aggression, caution is needed in spreading the Russian language, accompanied by information security

strategies to counter the language issue's use as a hybrid warfare tool.

Overall, a responsible, proactive elite stance, focused on strengthening the Ukrainian language and national identity, is key to ensuring linguistic unity, social harmony, and sustainable development for Ukraine. Balancing support for the state language with respect for linguistic minority rights, as well as uniting society around shared values, are necessary conditions for overcoming current challenges and ensuring national security.

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## Мова і мовна політика як інструменти формування національної ідентичності

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У статті здійснено філософський аналіз взаємозв'язку між мовою, національною та особистісною ідентичністю, а також роллю сучасної української еліти в контексті мовної політики України. Розглянуто філософські аспекти формування національної ідентичності через мову, вплив соціальних змін на ідентичність, а також суперечності в поглядах різних авторів щодо цих питань. Застосовано новаційний методологічний підхід, який спирається на теоретико-методологічну концепцію Ж. Деріди і демонструє перехід від мови тотожностей до мови розрізень як в онтологічному, так і гносеологічному дослідницьких вимірах. Пріоритет процедури розрізнення над пошуком тотожності призводить до новаторського осмислення концепту єдності через поєднання, суміщення соціального різноманіття. Культурна єдність нації постає конструктом, що ґрунтується на важливій присутності різноманітних суб'єктів, які створюють культурний і політичний спільносвіт. На основі робіт Б. Ажнюка, В. Кулика, О. Литвинчук та М. Пірен проаналізовано сучасні підходи до розуміння мовної політики, її європейські засади та вплив на процеси державотворення в Україні. Висвітлено роль еліти у консолідації суспільства та реалізації демократичних реформ, наведено конкретні приклади та пропозиції щодо вдосконалення мовної політики. Визначено перспективи подальших досліджень у цьому напрямку.

**Ключові слова:** мова, національна ідентичність, мовна політика, особистісна ідентичність, еліта, консолідація суспільства.

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