Language Attitude and Identity in the European Republics of the Former Soviet Union

Matthew H. Ciscel
University of South Carolina

Richard W. Hallett
Northeastern Illinois University

Angie Green
University of South Carolina

This study investigates language attitude and cultural identity within the national contexts in three European republics of the former Soviet Union: Lithuania, Ukraine, and Moldova. Results of a questionnaire given to two hundred subjects indicate that the cultural and historical differences among these republics have significantly affected the language attitudes of speakers in the three contexts.

1. Introduction

Language is a phenomenon central to the political, cultural, and socio-economic character of the modern nation-state. When a nation begins to emerge, or reemerge after a time of suppression, the language situation can become highly volatile, depending on the cohesiveness among individual language attitudes across the nation. This study investigates the linguistic context of national emergence in three

Texas Linguistic Forum 44(1): 48-61
Proceedings from the Eighth Annual Symposium about Language and Society—Austin
April 7-9, 2000

very different European republics of the former Soviet Union: Lithuania, Ukraine, and Moldova. Our purpose is, first, to elaborate the linguistic variation that has appeared in these countries since 1991 and, second, to show how the different cultural and historical identities of these nations have reemerged and have been reconstituted since independence, particularly in the form of attitudes towards each republic's local language, Russian, and English.

The interface among language, ideology, and individual attitudes proceeds from research in the areas of social psychology and sociolinguistics. Within these research traditions, language is seen as contextually and historically constructed, in the sense of Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia, referring to the multiple voices apparent in a particular speech event. Also, Bourdieu's (1991) notion of social markets, in which the individual negotiates status, captures the idea of language as socially constructed. A national, standard language is a fiction to Bakhtin and Bourdieu. Instead, a genuine typology of language always reflects the immediate and historical context of language use. Tying language in with ideology, we find that national languages do, in fact, exist, although more ideologically than linguistically, as in Anderson's (1991) idea of 'imagined' national communities. The nation exists as both a geographic reality and an ideologically constructed social, cultural, and linguistic unity. This is where attitudes come in. Since national languages are both 'imagined' and susceptible to a wide range of actual variation, individual attitudes to national languages and their varieties are important indicators of social friction or solidarity. The relationships between social groups on the one hand and the attitudes of those groups towards varieties of language on the other are elaborated in Edwards' (1999) overview of research into language attitudes. In summary, for this study, we take (1) language to be a socially-constructed set of speech norms that serve as the medium for human interaction, (2) national language to be an ideological construction generalizing over several related varieties of language and serving a cohesive function in the nation-state, and (3) language attitude to be the value, both socio-personal and socio-economic, ascribed to a particular language in a particular context by a particular participant. In this study, we focus primarily on the competing national languages in the macro-social context of emerging national identities in Lithuania, Ukraine, and Moldova.

2. Language in the (post-)Soviet Context

Before the late 1980's, the de facto national language in all of the republics of the Soviet Union was Russian. Even so, local 'national languages' were also supported. Thus, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Moldovans were encouraged to maintain their native languages, even though Russian, as the official 'language of international communication,' was the dominant language in education, media, and government (cf. Smith 1998). The small nations emerging from the Soviet Union had to deal with Russian-speaking minorities, continued economic dependence on Russia, and the new level of economic and cultural interaction with the West. The socio-economic value of Russian diminished to varying degrees and the corresponding value of English and other dominant national languages of the West mushroomed. The decline of Russian and the replacive rise of both local languages in places of power and English as an important second language serve as critical steps in the respective nation-building processes.

The strong rise in English as a second language is particularly significant, because English competes to some degree with the rising local language in creating the linguistic identity of the new nation-state. As Phillipson (1992) argued in his book *Linguistic Imperialism*, the spread of English throughout the world threatens the linguistic diversity of humankind (see also Phillipson 1998). Although Phillipson's accusations of linguicide and his notion of linguistic McDonaldization are extreme, particularly as applied to the former Soviet Union, the anglicization of the world, and particularly of Europe, is a real trend that deserves careful attention. It seems likely that an overly centralized English would eventually give in to Bakhtin's centrifugal forces and diversify. At any rate, English has become an important, although not yet all-important, language of international communication in Eastern Europe. Therefore, the present study has been designed to investigate language attitudes with regard to the local 'national language,' Russian, and English. These attitudes are expected to reflect the republics' national histories.

The history in Lithuania has produced a nation immensely proud of its language, one maintained despite several periods of occupation by neighboring empires and cultures. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, as noted by Kreindler, 'any native Balt who succeeded in gaining a higher education inevitably shifted to the language of culture and rapidly became Germanized or Polonized' (1988:6). In 1864, the Russian Tsar took control of much of Lithuanian territory, suppressing the Latin script and russifying the language used in government and education. Following the First World War, Lithuania achieved independence, after which the local language gained prestige and the nation began to emerge. During this short independence, Lithuania looked westward, adopting German along with Lithuanian as the official languages and showing interest in English and Esperanto as international languages (Kreindler 1988). However, both at the start and end of World War II, the Soviet Union was able to annex Lithuania. During the Stalinist period of this occupation, there was an attempt to wean the Lithuanian language and identity away from Western influences. However, its people fairly successfully deflected attempts at russification. In the post-Stalin period, these constraints were loosened somewhat, but the general program of superficial local language promotion and covert russification continued into the Gorbachev era. By the 1980's, Lithuanians were commonly assumed to be balanced bilinguals (cf. Kreindler 1988:13). Even so, they and the other Balts remained notoriously loyal to their languages, setting up their own language schools and generally wiggling around the policies coming down from Moscow.

On November 18, 1988, freed by Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika, an amendment to the Lithuanian constitution designated Lithuanian as the official language of the Lithuanian SSR. Finally, on March 11, 1990, Lithuania declared its independence from the Soviet Union, foreshadowing the union's complete disintegration more than a year later. Unlike other former republics of the USSR, Lithuania is relatively homogeneous, ethnically and linguistically. In 1989, the population was ethnically 80% Lithuanian, 9% Russian, and 7% Polish, among others (Shamshur 1994:10). With the exodus of the Russian military and other Russian nationals, the population is now likely even more homogeneous. Therefore, the people of Lithuania can be said to have a strong national identity that has survived occupation fairly intact. Compared to the other republics studied here, the Lithuanian identity and language are the best maintained. Occupation by a succession of Poles, Germans, and Russians perhaps gave Lithuanians the perspective and leverage necessary to resist all three.

Ukraine is significantly less homogeneous, both ethnically and linguistically. And its national identity is also less clear. As in Lithuania, the

Ukrainian nation has a long history of being occupied and repressed, in the West by Poles, Habsburgs, and Turks, and in the East by their kindred Russian neighbors. Much of Ukraine was under the Russian Tsar in the nineteenth century. But even more critically, Ukraine did not emerge into independent nationhood between the world wars like many of the other East European nations. Instead, its Western fringes were included in Romania, Czechoslovakia, and to a great extent Poland, while the bulk of Ukraine was integrated into the Soviet Union. However, one small step toward nationhood occurred in 1905 when the Ukrainian language first became a legal written language. With the advent of the Soviet Union after World War I, the Ukrainian national identity and language got a significant boost under the Soviet policies of national development within the Soviet framework. However, as mentioned above, this support for non-Russian languages and cultures was often only for show. Russian officials continued to insist that Ukraine was merely a 'little Russia' and that the Ukrainian language was basically a dialect of Russian. Unlike in Lithuania, many Ukrainians bought into this Soviet ideology and submitted to the process of russification. By the 1980s, about half of the population of Ukraine claimed Russian as their first language. The industrial regions in East and South Ukraine were the most thoroughly russified, whereas West Ukraine remained mostly rural and Ukrainian speaking. In a recent ethnography of language attitudes in Ukraine, Bilaniuk (1998) identifies the geographic differences as an impediment to the development of a homogeneous national language and identity. Independence in 1991 was accompanied by a number of economic, linguistic, and national crises. As Ukraine's first independent national emergence in modern times, the transition has been neither smooth nor decisive. Linguistically, the nation moved to an exclusionary policy that props up the value of Ukrainian at the expense of Russian. At the same time, instruction of Western languages such as English has become a priority of educational policy. Also, political extremism in the East and West of Ukraine has led to a polarization of language attitudes. Such divisiveness between Russian and Ukrainian identities has characterized the language situation in Ukraine since independence.

The national and linguistic situations are even more complicated in Moldova. This nation first appeared as a Romanian people under Turkish sovereignty. As the Turkish hold on the Balkans fell apart in the nineteenth century, half of ancient Moldova joined with other Romanian-speaking principalities along the Danube to form the

Romanian nation. However, the eastern half of ancient Moldova fell under Russian control. After the First World War, all Romanian-speaking peoples, including these eastern Moldovans were integrated into Greater Romania. Thus, the Moldovans participated in the second phase of nation-building in Romania. However, it was not a pleasant experience. As explained in Livezeanu (1995), the Romanian government in Bucharest did not understand the Moldovans' sympathy for Bolshevism and made it clear that Moldovans were second-rate Romanians. Therefore, when the Soviet Union annexed Moldova in 1940, there was little local resistance. During both the Tsarist and Soviet occupations of Moldova, the urban areas were intensely russified. As in Ukraine, forced migration and suppression of the local language served the russification effort. Unlike in Ukraine, however, the suppression of the local dialect of Romanian was particularly politicized. As elaborated by Dyer (1999) and King (2000), the Soviet authorities attempted to distance the Moldovans from the Romanians by insisting that their dialect (written in Cyrillic script) was actually a completely different Eastern Romance language with minimal ties to Romanian. This Soviet nationalizing of Moldovan culture and language was accompanied by the same indirect russification project that was seen in Lithuania and Ukraine. By the 1980s, most Moldovans were bilingual in Russian and 'Moldovan,' and many urbanites had switched to Russian altogether. However, as in the other republics, the loosening under Gorbachev lead to a national revival concerned with the re-identification of Moldovan culture and language with Romanian.

On August 31, 1989, the Moldovan constitution was amended to recognize the identity between Moldovan and Romanian, to change to the Latin script, and to make Moldovan the official language. However, the population of Moldova was only two-thirds ethnically and linguistically Romanian. The minority groups mostly spoke Russian as their first language. The tension between Romanian nationalists and these minority groups came to a head in 1992 after independence and several moves toward reunification with Romania. The establishment of two very small break-away regions within this small republic was the result of a brief civil war fought in the summer of 1992. Since then, the central government of Moldova has made several concessions to try to reintegrate the various regions. As a result, Moldova has one of the most generous policies concerning minorities in the post-Communist world. However, this civil war and its after-

math have had a significant impact on the nation-building process in the republic. With chances of reunification with Romania swept aside, Moldovans have tried to whittle together a distinct national identity while also recognizing their strong cultural and linguistic ties with Romania. This effort has been facilitated by continued identification with their Soviet past and the Russian language in particular. However, the issue of Moldovan national identity remains divisive even though many Moldovans have rejected a linguistic and cultural identity separate from Romanian. In sum, the national identities emerging in Lithuania, Ukraine, and Moldova form a cline from stable to unstable. The data collected in this study are expected to reflect these degrees of national cohesion.

3. A Study of Language Attitudes

The data presented here were collected using a self-report questionnaire that asked subjects to report their attitudes toward the three national languages that they speak best. The 212 questionnaires ultimately collected from each country were not as equal as we had initially hoped. Consequently, the final data include 105 subjects in Lithuania, 42 in Ukraine, and 65 in Moldova. Even so, the subject pool from each country was judged to be fairly representative of the range of actual ethnicities by comparing our data with census data from the late 1980's. The questionnaire was designed such that the subjects could define their own ethnic identity, their first language, and their most important second language. Other background information including age, gender, and profession was also collected. The ethnicity and language identities for each country are presented in Tables (1) through (3), respectively.

(1) Lithuanian frequencies

N=105	Ethnicity/Nationality	*	L1	L2	L3	L Total
None	1 (1%)	*			32	32 (30%)
Lithuanian	102 (97%)	*	**104**	1		105 (100%)
Russian	2 (2%)	*	1	**58**	19	78 (74%)
Germanic		*		**44**	25	69 (66%)
W. Romance		*		2	19	21 (20%)
Other Slavic		*			10	10 (9.5%)

In Table (1), we see that Lithuania is almost monolithically Lithuanian in both ethnicity and first language. Important second languages are Russian with 58 respondents and Germanic languages (excepting English)

with 44. Not coincidentally, the Russian-Germanic split in second language identification correlates significantly with age: older Lithuanians chose Russian as their second language and younger Lithuanians chose a Germanic language, either German or one of the Scandinavian tongues. Thus, Lithuanian, Russian, and Germanic languages were each identified as significant languages for more than 50% of the respondents.

(2) Ukrainian frequencies

N=42	Ethnicity/Nationality	*	L1	L2	L3	L Total
None		*			14	14 (33%)
Ukrainian	34 (81%)	*	**14**	**18**	7	39 (93%)
Russian	7 (17%)	*	**28**	6	8	42 (100%)
Germanic		*		**11**	5	16 (38%)
W. Romance		*		6	5	11 (26%)
Other Slavic		*		1	2	3 (7%)
Non-IE[1]	1 (2%)	*			1	1 (2%)

In Table (2), the ethnic and linguistic identities of the subjects are much more divergent. Although 81% identified themselves as ethnically Ukrainian, only 33% identified Ukrainian as their first language. The rest indicated that Russian was their first language. Eighteen of these did identify Ukrainian as their most important second language, though. Altogether, 100% claimed some knowledge of Russian and 93% some knowledge of Ukrainian. Although, 11 respondents chose German as their most important second language, only 38% of the Ukrainian subject pool claimed any knowledge of German at all. Therefore, Ukrainian and Russian appear to be the most significant languages in Ukraine.

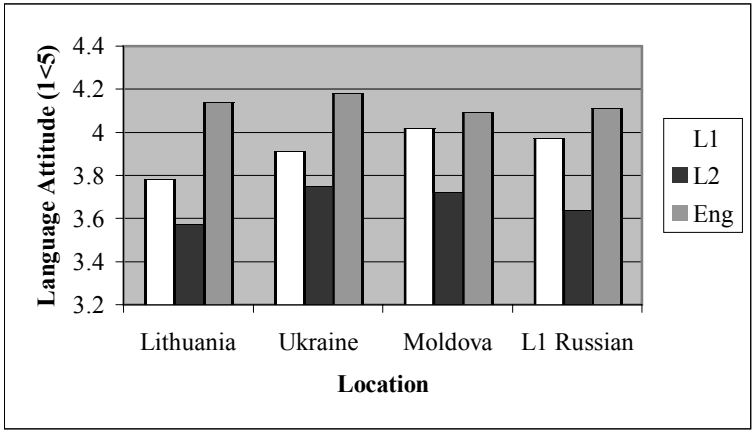
(3) Moldovan frequencies

N=65	Ethnicity/Nationality	*	L1	L2	L3	L Total
None	1 (1.5%)	*			24	24 (37%)
Ukrainian	3 (5%)	*		3	1	4 (6%)
Moldovan	41 (63%)	*	**8**	**5**	1	14 (22%)
Romanian	13 (20%)	*	**38**	**9**	1	48 (74%)
Russian	6 (9%)	*	**19**	**37**	6	62 (95%)
Germanic		*		4	1	5 (8%)
W. Romance		*		7	30	37 (57%)
Non-IE	1 (1.5%)	*			1	1 (1.5%)

[1]Non-Indo European.

Finally, Table (3) shows the distribution of ethnicities and languages in Moldova. Ethnicity in Moldova is clearly the most heterogeneous of the three republics treated here. The 63% ethnic Moldovans include native speakers of both Russian and Romanian/Moldovan. In addition, 20% claim Romanian ethnicity, 9% Russian ethnicity, and 5% Ukrainian. Critical in the language identities in Moldova are that most first language speakers of Romanian/Moldovan identify their language now as Romanian, while only 8 continue to call it Moldovan. A more even split, 9 to 5, appears in the L2 column between Romanian and Moldovan. Even so, aside from a few who identified Ukrainian or another Western European language as their second language, L1 Russian speakers mostly identified L2 Romanian or Moldovan and L1 Romanian/Moldovan speakers mostly identified L2 Russian. It is also worth noting that other Romance languages are widely learned in Moldova as a sign of cultural solidarity with the Latin-based world. That is why 57% of subjects in Moldova claimed some knowledge of another Romance language. Despite this, the most significant languages in Moldova are Romanian/Moldovan and Russian.

(4) Attitude to language by location (n.s.) and language ($p<0.01$)

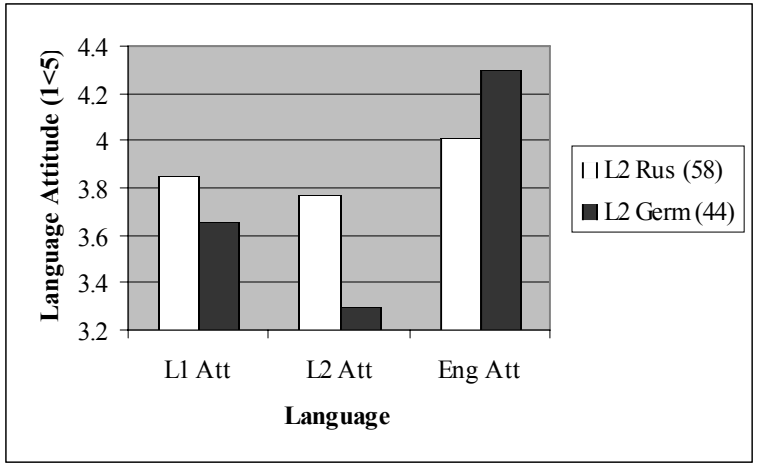


Once the subjects had identified their ethnicity and first and second languages, they were asked to evaluate their L1, L2 and English by indicating to what extent they agreed with five statements that each language is beautiful, scientific, uncivilized, useful, and difficult to learn. The third and fifth descriptors were taken as negative and

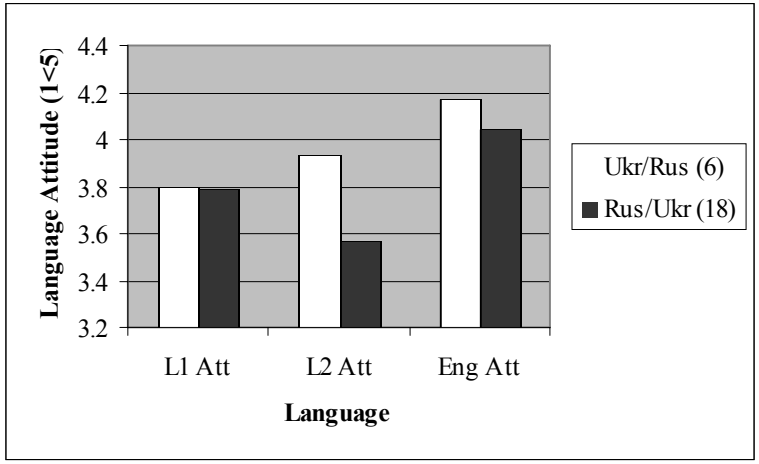
inverted for scoring. Answers were scored from one to five, with five being the most positive. The graph in (4) shows the attitude responses for each republic by language (i.e. L1, L2, and English). A fourth set of bars indicates the responses of L1 Russian speakers across all three republics. It is noteworthy that the differences across languages are highly significant ($p<0.01$) while the differences across republics are not. In the entire subject pool, the tendency was to value English above the first language, with the non-English second language receiving the lowest value. The strong showing for attitudes towards English appears to reflect the powerful orientation of these reemerging nations toward the values of Anglo-American culture and economics. It also reflects the restrictive homogenizing effect that accompanies the spread of English language dominance in the world. These results would also appear to contradict the notion that these republics are in a nationalizing phase of their history. However, the lack of differences across the republics suggests that a closer look at the data for each republic is warranted.

It was determined above that Lithuania has one primary L1 group and two L2 groups based on age. The graph in (5) presents the responses of these two L2 groups by language. In Lithuania, the older generation of L2 Russian speakers values Russian only slightly below Lithuanian. Additionally, English is valued only slightly higher than the first two languages in this L2 group. The ambivalence of this group contrasts significantly with the younger L2 Germanic group. This second group also placed Lithuanian second after English in value. But, English stands further ahead. Meanwhile, the value of Germanic languages is held to be much lower than that of English. These differences in L2 groups demonstrate a tendency for upcoming generations of Lithuanians to ignore the Soviet past and focus on the English dominated cultural and economic markets of the West. In as much as the consistent second place showing for Lithuanian marks the local language's significance as an emblem of national reemergence, its declining value across generations warns that the dangers addressed by Phillipson (1998, 1992) may warrant attention. In sum, Lithuania has emerged from the Soviet experience with a strong, homogeneous national identity, with the caveat of new threats from English.

(5) Attitudes in Lithuania by L2 group ($p<0.05$) and language ($p<0.05$)



(6) Attitudes in Ukraine by L1/L2 group ($p<0.05$) and language (n.s.)

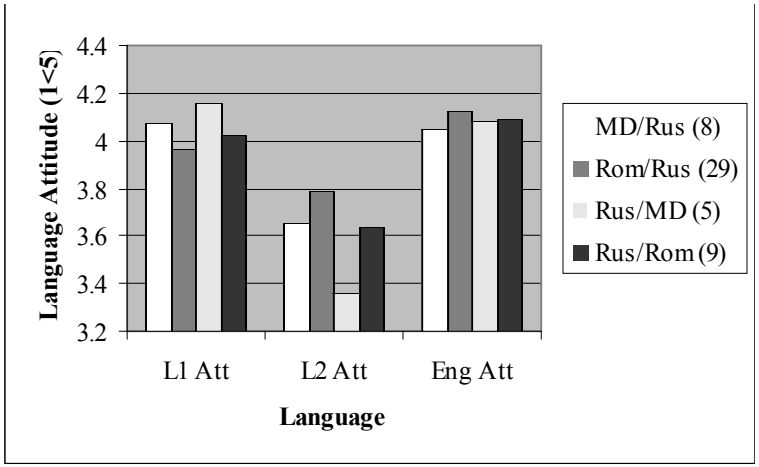


If the homogeneity in Lithuania has facilitated entrance into the Western world, then the duel identity in Ukraine has certainly served as a hindrance. Previously, Ukrainian and Russian were identified as the two significant national languages in this republic. There are large groups of native speakers of each language. Also, the proximity (both genetically and geographically) of the languages has facilitated a

nation of bilinguals. The attitudes toward these languages and English appear in (6). The Russian language and culture continue to have a strong influence in many parts of Ukraine. This study shows that the L1 Ukrainian group even values Russian above Ukrainian. Otherwise, this data follows that same pattern as seen for all republics in (4). This pattern suggests that Ukraine is wavering between a Western and a Russian orientation. But, most significantly, the distinct Ukrainian identity that some strive so hard for seems to be getting lost in the mix. The small subject numbers for this republic indicate, however, that there may be problems with external validity. Further investigation of Ukraine is needed before clear conclusions about its identity crises can be drawn.

The national identity in Moldova is both clearer and more complicated. Two-thirds of Moldovans are ethnically Romanian, establishing a clear linguistic and cultural heritage. But, as discussed above, this identity has Romanian and Moldovan versions, both of which must compete with the aspirations of Russian speaking minorities.

(7) Attitudes in Moldova by L1/L2 group ($p<0.05$) and language ($p<0.05$)



The graph in (7) elaborates the complexity. L1 and L2 'Moldovan' speakers rate their first language above English and their L2 well below all. On the other hand, those subjects who eschewed the

old Soviet label for Romanian (L1 or L2) fell into the pattern of ranking English higher than both L1 and L2. These patterns do not, however, coincide with age, suggesting that ideology of 'Moldovan' as distinct will persist. This will likely lead to continued splintering of the Romanian majority and uncertainty in the quest for a stable national identity and economy. But, the relatively weaker position of English in this republic suggests that the nationality question remains fairly local, for better or for worse.

4. Conclusions

This study has been able to draw some generalizations about language, attitude and nationhood in three European republics of the former Soviet Union. There is a strong sense of identity in Lithuania, a duel identity in Ukraine, and an unstable tripartite identity split in Moldova. Despite all of these divisions, it is English that is generally most favorably assessed in the study. This is because of the socio-economic, rather than the socio-personal, value attached to English. Diversity of attitudes is determined by the historical and cultural backgrounds of the speakers in each republic. Language contact and change reflect historically and culturally generated attitudes and identities. Phillipson (1998:102) states that 'the expansion of English in the *postcommunist* world is now less a strategic interest than a commercial opportunity' (italics in original). Although this appears accurate at present, such a generalization fails to capture the complexity of the linguistic and national environments emerging from Communism. Future research should focus more exactly how language attitudes and identities affect language learning and use.

References

Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Holquist (ed.), Emerson and Holquist (trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bilaniuk, Laada. 1998. *The Politics of Language and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*, Thompson (ed.), Raymond and Adamson (trans.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Dyer, Donald. 1999. *The Romanian Dialect in Moldova: A Study in Language and Politics*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.

Edwards, John. 1999. Refining our understanding of language attitudes. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 18:101-110.

King, Charles. 2000. *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture*. Stanford: Hoover.

Kreindler, Isabelle. 1988. Baltic area languages in the Soviet Union: A sociolinguistic perspective. *Journal of Baltic Studies* 19:5-20.

Livezeanu, Irina. 1995. *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation-building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Phillipson, Robert. 1998. Globalizing English: Are linguistic human rights an alternative to linguistic imperialism? *Language Sciences* 20:101-112.

Phillipson, Robert. 1992. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shamshur, Oleg V. 1994. Current ethnic migration issues in the former USSR. In *Ethnicity in Eastern Europe*: Questions of Migration, Language Rights and Education, Sue Wright and Helen Kelly (eds.). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. 7-27.

Smith, Michael G. 1998. *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR*, 1917-1953. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Linguistics Program
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29208
mhciscel@engr.sc.edu