
**THE UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE
AS THE VERNACULAR MEDIUM OF RUS':
A HISTORICAL-LINGUISTIC INQUIRY**

Deshko P. P.

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INTRODUCTION

Language emerges not merely as a means of communication but also as a fundamental basis of cognition, thinking, and the spiritual self-identification of peoples. As stated in the First Epistle to the Corinthians (14:14): «For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful»¹. In this context, the Apostle Paul emphasizes the intrinsic connection between language and intellect: without comprehension of the word, the meaning of spiritual communication is nullified. Thus, language functions as a communicative-cognitive system, a form of existence of an ethnos, and a representation of its value orientations and worldview foundations.

The national language operates as a factor in the awareness of collective values and the coordination of practical activity. It ensures the effectiveness of communicative processes – from the regulation of production instructions at enterprises to the development of software in the field of information technologies. It is through language that the capacity for comprehension, interaction, and creative activity is formed, which ultimately determines the level of a nation's competitiveness.

Is there any state known to history that, having neglected its own language, achieved significant success in the development of science, culture, and economy? This question is evidently rhetorical.

Insufficient command of one's native language may be interpreted as an indicator of spiritual and intellectual degradation. Language constitutes the foundation of cultural identity; it is a carrier of meanings and a means of affirming truth. The devaluation of language effectively signifies disregard for culture, nation, and statehood. Consequently, language policy acquires not only

¹ Новий Завіт Господа нашого Ісуса Христа. Псалми / пер. з грец. П. Дубовика. Ужгород : Закарпаття, 2006. С. 170.

a cultural but also a security dimension: it determines the level of informational resilience of society, its cultural autonomy, and its economic subjectivity. Ignoring the linguistic factor leads to multidimensional dependence – political, economic, and spiritual – and results in the loss of the domestic market, as it creates conditions for the dominance of external capital and cultural expansion.

Over a prolonged period of Russian-Ukrainian relations, a deliberate policy aimed at denying the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian language and its historical development can be observed. In different historical epochs, numerous prohibitions and restrictions were imposed on its functioning in the public sphere, accompanied by the discrediting of Ukrainian-speaking populations. In the context of the contemporary Russian-Ukrainian war, these narratives have intensified, reinforcing informational manipulations surrounding the language issue.

The relevance of this study is conditioned by the spread of pseudoscientific concepts according to which the Ukrainian language is interpreted as an artificial construct, lacking an independent history, or as a dialect of the Russian language, or as a result of the Polonization of the population of Ukraine. Such approaches were represented by certain figures of Russian historiography and philology, in particular M. Lomonosov², M. Pogodin³, and O. Sobolovskii⁴. At the same time, the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian language and the continuity of its historical development have been convincingly substantiated in the works of A. Krymskyi⁵, H. Pivtorak⁶, S. Smal-Stotsky⁷, K. Tyshchenko⁸, and Y. Shevelov⁹, as well as other leading scholars.

² Ломоносов М. В. Российская граматика. Санкт-Петербург: При императорской академии наук, 1755. 213 с.

³ Погодин М. П. Записка о древнем языке русском (Письмо к И. И. Срезневскому). *ИАН по Отделению русского языка и словесности*. Санкт-Петербург, 1856. Ч. V. Вып. 2. С. 70–92.

⁴ Соболовский О. И. Как говорили в Киеве в XIV и XV вв., 1883.

⁵ Крымский А. Ю. Древнекиевский говор. *Известия Отделения русского языка и словесности императорской Академии наук*, 1906. Т. XI. Кн. 3. С. 368–411.

⁶ Півторак Г. П. Походження українців, росіян, білорусів та їхніх мов: міфи і правда про трьох братів слов'янських зі «спільної колиски». Київ : Академія, 2001. 152 с. ; Півторак Г. П. Українці: звідки ми і наша мова. Київ : Наукова думка, 1999. 200 с.

⁷ Smal-Stocky S., Gartner T. *Grammatik der Ruthenischen (Ukrainischen) Sprache*. Wien: Buchhandlung der Szewczenko-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften in Lemberg, 1913. 550 s.

⁸ Тищенко К. М. Десять історичних свідків прадавності української мови. *Вісник НТШ*. 2023. № 67. С. 64–76 ; Тищенко К. М. Контури лексико-топонімічної стратиграфії України і етногенез українців. *Народна творчість та етнографія*. 2005. №. 4. С. 31–44 ; Тищенко К. М. Прадавність української мови, віддзеркалена в мовах сусідів. 1. *Мовознавство*. 2023. № 1. С. 14–28 ; Тищенко К. М. Прадавність української мови, віддзеркалена в мовах сусідів. 2. *Мовознавство*. 2023. № 2. С. 18–43 ; Тищенко К. М. Правда про походження української мови. *Український тиждень*. 2012. № 39(256). С. 22–64.

⁹ Шевельов Ю. В. Историčna фонологія української мови / пер. з англ. С. В. Вакуленка та ін. Харків : Акта, 2002. 1054 с.

1. Historical and philological underpinnings of the Ukrainian language

According to the conceptually grounded periodization proposed by Yuriy Shevelov, the historical development of the Ukrainian language comprises the following stages: Proto-Ukrainian (7th–11th centuries), Old Ukrainian (11th–14th centuries), Early Middle Ukrainian (15th–16th centuries), Middle Ukrainian (mid-16th – early 18th centuries), Late Middle Ukrainian (18th century), and Modern Ukrainian (from the late 18th century to the present)¹⁰. This framework is based on a comprehensive analysis of phonological, morphological, and lexical transformations that attest to a distinct evolutionary trajectory of the Ukrainian linguistic system.

The language that, during the period of Kyivan Rus, was designated as “Rus’ian” (Ukrainian) functioned as a living vernacular in Kyiv, Chernihiv, Pereiaslav, Halych, and other centers of Rus. At the same time, following the adoption of Eastern Christianity, Church Slavonic assumed a dominant position in ecclesiastical and administrative spheres. It was in this language that the vast majority of chronicles, hagiographic works, official acts, and written monuments of the 10th–12th centuries were produced. The Church Slavonic tradition was primarily based on the Bulgarian recension, as also emphasized by Yuriy Shevelov. However, this literary language did not supplant the vernacular foundation but existed in continuous interaction with it. The penetration of elements of the spoken language into Church Slavonic texts is evidenced by numerous linguistic features recorded in manuscript sources, including the Ostromir Gospel (1057) and the Dobrylo Gospel (1164), among others. Such phenomena are generally explained by the influence of the local linguistic environment on scribes.

An additional argument for the early formation and historical continuity of the Ukrainian (Proto-Ukrainian) community is the presence of relics of linguistic interaction with other peoples, as well as the preservation of ancient Proto-Slavic elements; these aspects have been thoroughly investigated by Konstantyn Tyshchenko and Hryhorii Pivtorak. Just as the first utterances of a child testify to its existence, so too the lexical remnants of ancient ethnic communities serve as evidence of their historical reality.

According to the research of Konstantyn Tyshchenko, the Ukrainian language possesses ten historical testimonies confirming its development and long-term existence:

I. The first witness to the existence of the Proto-Ukrainian language – the Upper Sorbian language.

¹⁰ Там само.

- II. The second witness – the Polabian language.
- III. The third witness – the Lida–Loyew isogloss continuum.
- IV. The fourth witness to the antiquity of a number of Ukrainian linguistic features (11th–12th centuries) – the Novgorod birch-bark letters.
- V. The fifth witness of ancient components of the Ukrainian language (4th century) – the Gothic language.
- VI. The sixth Ukrainian witness (2nd century CE) – Celtic neighbors; in particular, the Celtic origin of the suffix **-yna**.
- VII. The seventh Ukrainian witness – the Popular Latin future imperfective tense (2nd century CE).
- VIII. The eighth Ukrainian witness as a kind of «chronological indicator» for Proto-Slavic (2nd century CE) – the Swadesh list; comparison of Swadesh lists across Slavic languages.
- IX. The ninth Ukrainian witness (5th century BCE) – the Scythians; in particular, references by Aristophanes to Scythian pronunciation.
- X. The tenth Ukrainian witness – the Ukrainian language itself as an integral system¹¹.

The specific features of the development of the Ukrainian language and the processes of Ukrainian ethnogenesis preclude the validity of the concept of the «Old Rus' nationality» of the 10th–12th centuries, since the formation of the Ukrainian language and ethnos began long before the emergence of this artificial theoretical construct.

According to the conclusions of Konstantyn Tyshchenko, ancient elements of the Ukrainian language were formed under the influence of the languages of ancient peoples. In particular, the phoneme **-r-** [r̥] is associated with Scythian linguistic influence; the suffix **-yna** is of Celtic origin; the derivational suffix **-ar** is traced to the Gothic linguistic tradition; and the forms of the future imperfective tense (*yistymu*, *zhytymesh*) with endings **-mu**, **-mesh**, **-me**, **-memo**, **-mete**, **-mut** arose under the influence of the Latin language of the Romans¹².

On the basis of the above considerations, the corresponding linguistic phenomena may be illustrated. In particular, words with the suffix **-yna**, associated with Celtic influence, include: *liudyna*, *divchyna*, *khlopchyna*, *rodyna*, *tvaryna*, *perlyna*, *drabyna*. Lexemes with the suffix **-ar**, linked to the Gothic language, include: *drukar*, *pysar*, *zhnyvar*, *kosar*, *shkoliar*, *muliar*.

¹¹ Тищенко К. М. Десять історичних свідків прадавності української мови. *Вісник НТШ*. 2023. № 67. С. 64–76.

¹² Тищенко К. М. Прадавність української мови, віддзеркалена в мовах сусідів. 1. *Мовознавство*. 2023. № 1. С. 14–28 ; Тищенко К. М. Прадавність української мови, віддзеркалена в мовах сусідів. 2. *Мовознавство*. 2023. № 2. С. 18–43.

Forms of the future imperfective tense that developed under the influence of the Latin linguistic tradition may be exemplified as follows: *yistymu*, *yistymesh*, *yistyme*, *yistymemo*, *yistymete*, *yistymut*¹³.

The Ukrainian language has inherited a substantial body of features of Proto-Slavic origin, which confirms its antiquity and self-sufficiency alongside other Slavic languages. Hryhorii Pivtorak identified key features of the Ukrainian language that have Proto-Slavic foundations:

- the ending **-u** in the genitive singular of masculine nouns with the former u-stem: *solodu*, *medu*, *domu*, *verkhу*, *polu*;
- the endings **-ovi**, **-evi** (**-ievi**) in the dative singular of masculine nouns of this group: *solodovi*, *medovi*, *domovi*, and subsequently in other masculine nouns;
- alternation of consonants **h**, **k**, **kh** with sibilants **z**, **ts**, **s** in the dative and locative singular (*noha* – *nozi*, *ruka* – *rutsi*, *vukha* – *u vusi* – *P. D.*);
- the presence of the vocative case: *zhenо*, *druzhe*, *kniazhe*, *brate*, *zemle*, *vладыko*, *uchyteliu*;
- dative forms of pronouns: *meni*, *tobi*, *sobi*;
- third-person forms of verbs in the present and simple future tenses of the first conjugation: *mozhe*, *ubyvaie*, *ide*, *zhyve*, *pouchaie*;
- the ending **-mo** in first-person plural verb forms in the present and future tenses: *daiemо*, *postavyemо*, *pytaiemо*, *pomahaiemо*, etc¹³.

Thus, the presented results of linguistic research convincingly demonstrate the historical continuity of the Ukrainian language and its independent differentiation from the Proto-Slavic linguistic community. This, in turn, refutes the pseudoscientific concepts of Russian historiography of the 18th–20th centuries and confirms the significant place of the Ukrainian language in contemporary international scholarly discourse.

2. Epigraphic and Written Sources as Evidence of Vernacular Practice

Evidence of the functioning of the Ukrainian language in the popular milieu is also provided by the graffiti of Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv. S. O. Vysotskyi, who studied the corpus of inscriptions from the Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Kyiv dating from the 11th to the 17th centuries, identified linguistic features in the graffiti of the 11th–12th centuries that correlate with the Ukrainian linguistic tradition. This finding refutes claims that the Ukrainian language supposedly emerged only in the 13th–14th centuries from a «common ancestor».

¹³ Півторак Г. П. Походження українців, росіян, білорусів та їхніх мов: міфи і правда про трьох братів слов'янських зі «спільної колиски». Київ : Академія, 2001. С. 45.

In particular, graffiti No. 108 records the text: «МАТН|НХОТАУН|ДБТНУА|ББЖА|ГЕТ (segmentation – P. D.)»¹⁴, which can be reconstructed as: «Мати, не хочучи дитя, біжить геть...» («Mother, not wishing for the child, ran away...») (see Fig. 1).

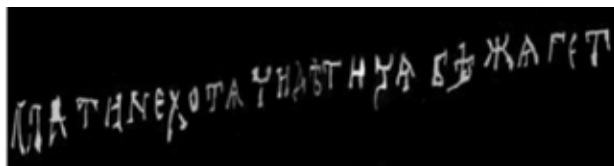


Fig. 1. Graffito No. 108 discovered in Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv¹⁵

This inscription of the 11th century, discovered on the walls of Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, is rendered in modern Russian translation as: «Мать, не желая ребёнка, бежала прочь...». We agree with the conclusion of S. O. Vysotskyi that this text contains linguistic features characteristic of the Ukrainian language.

Another inscription from the late 11th – early 12th century, also found in Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, reads as follows: «О|ГОРЕ|ТОББ|АНД|РОННУЄ|ОХБ|ТОББ|НББОЖЕ (segmentation – P. D.)»¹⁶, which can be reconstructed as: «О горе тобі, Андрониче, ох тобі, небоже...» («Oh woe to you, Andronych, oh you poor fellow...») (see Fig. 2).

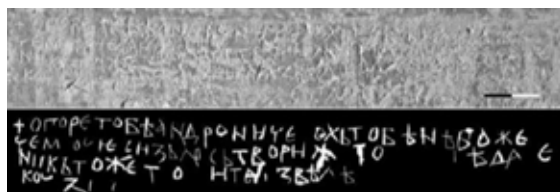


Fig. 2. Graffito No. 204 discovered in Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv¹⁷

¹⁴ Корнієнко В. В. Корпус графіті Софії Київської (XI – початок XVIII ст.). Ч. IX: Північні внутрішня та зовнішня галереї. Київ : Горобець, 2019. С 46–47.

¹⁵ Редченко О. Не молитвою єдиною. Українська мова в Київській Русі. *Київське православ'я*. URL: <http://kyiv-pravosl.info/2015/05/23/ne-molytvoyu-edynoyu-ukrajinska-mova-v-kyjivskij-rusi/> (дата звернення: 25.04.2026).

¹⁶ Корнієнко В. В. Корпус графіті Софії Київської (XI – початок XVIII ст.). Ч. VIII: Південні внутрішня та зовнішня галереї. Київ : Горобець, 2018. С. 440.

¹⁷ Редченко О. Не молитвою єдиною. Українська мова в Київській Русі. *Київське православ'я*. URL: <http://kyiv-pravosl.info/2015/05/23/ne-molytvoyu-edynoyu-ukrajinska-mova-v-kyjivskij-rusi/> (дата звернення: 25.04.2026).

In modern Russian translation, this text reads: «О горе тебе, Андроник, ой тебе, племянник...». Thus, in this case as well, linguistic features characteristic of the Ukrainian tradition can be observed.

The analysis of the graffiti of Saint Sophia Cathedral (11th–12th centuries), conducted in particular by Serhii Vysotskyi, provides grounds for significant generalizations regarding the nature of the functioning of the Ukrainian language in the pre-Mongol period. The identified inscriptions constitute not only paleographic or epigraphic material but also direct evidence of the living linguistic practice of broad social strata of Kyivan Rus.

First and foremost, it is essential that the graffiti of Saint Sophia Cathedral reflect not the книжна, standardized Church Slavonic language, but rather a spontaneous linguistic level – the language of everyday communication. The very fact that inscriptions were made on the walls of the cathedral by various individuals – from clergy to laypeople – attests to the democratic character of this source. Unlike chronicles or liturgical texts, which underwent editorial processing, graffiti record speech in its immediate, unregulated form. For this reason, they possess exceptional value for historical linguistics.

From a scholarly perspective, it is important to emphasize that graffiti cannot be regarded as a fully systematic linguistic corpus; they are fragmentary and incidental in origin. However, it is precisely this fragmentariness that constitutes their advantage: it allows scholars to avoid artificial normalization of speech and to capture natural linguistic variation characteristic of different social groups. Thus, graffiti function as a kind of «cross-section» of the living language that existed alongside the official written tradition.

Consequently, the analysis of the inscriptions of Saint Sophia Cathedral confirms that the Ukrainian language has deep historical roots and was formed as a vernacular, spoken system long before its literary codification. Its origins should be sought not only in written monuments of high style but also in the everyday linguistic practice of the population of Kyivan Rus. It is precisely this popular foundation that ensured the resilience and continuity of the Ukrainian linguistic tradition, which can be traced from the medieval period to the present.

3. The progressive functional development of the vernacular in subsequent periods

Despite the dominance of Church Slavonic in official domains, the vernacular language preserved its continuity and gradually expanded the scope of its use. This process became particularly evident during the existence of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, when the Ruthenian language acquired administrative status.

The use of the vernacular in legal documents, administrative records, and everyday communication testifies to its stability and adaptability. The interaction between written and spoken forms contributed to the gradual standardization of linguistic features that later shaped the Ukrainian literary language. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the chancery norm was not isolated from living speech; rather, it existed in constant interaction with it, which led to the penetration of vernacular elements into written texts.

This tendency is particularly evident in legal monuments, above all in the Lithuanian Statutes (1529, 1566, 1588), which represent a high degree of codification of the written language while preserving features genetically connected with the vernacular linguistic substratum. Their language records phonetic, morphological, and lexical characteristics that later became defining features of the Ukrainian linguistic system, including the use of verb forms ending in *-tʹ*, the development of vocalism, specific case endings, and lexical composition.

Thus, the linguistic situation in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is characterized not by opposition but by the interpenetration of written and spoken traditions. It was precisely this interaction that facilitated the gradual crystallization of supradialectal norms, which subsequently formed the basis of the Ukrainian literary language. Accordingly, the evolution of the Ukrainian language appears as a continuous process in which the vernacular element played a decisive role, ensuring historical continuity and the structural integrity of the linguistic system.

Separately, it is important to emphasize the role of translation activity, which functioned as one of the key channels for adapting the written (bookish) language to the needs of a broader social milieu. Translations of religious texts, in particular such monuments as the *Peresopnytsia Gospel* (1556–1561), demonstrate a deliberate approximation of language to the vernacular base. This attests to a shift in the communicative paradigm – from a sacralized model, confined to a narrow circle of users, to a more open one oriented toward a wider audience.

From the perspective of modern historical linguistics, these processes may be interpreted as manifestations of the gradual desacralization of the Church Slavonic linguistic system and a transition toward a functionally differentiated model. In this sense, the development of the Ukrainian language in the late medieval and early modern periods corresponds to broader European tendencies associated with the increasing role of vernacular languages in public and cultural life.

Thus, the functional expansion of the vernacular is reflected not only in the growing number of domains in which it was employed, but also in the

deepening of its structural influence on the written tradition. It is precisely as a result of this process that a linguistic system capable of meeting the needs of everyday, official, and cultural communication was formed, which became one of the key factors in the emergence of the Ukrainian literary language.

CONCLUSIONS

The conducted study provides grounds for a comprehensive reconsideration of the genesis and historical development of the Ukrainian language as a distinct linguistic phenomenon with deep roots in the popular milieu of Rus. The synthesis of linguistic, historical, and written sources makes it possible to formulate several fundamental conclusions.

First and foremost, the Ukrainian language emerges as the result of a long-term, continuous evolutionary process originating in the Proto-Slavic linguistic community, yet already at early stages demonstrating a distinct trajectory of development. The periodization proposed by Yuriy Shevelov convincingly attests to the existence of Proto-Ukrainian and Old Ukrainian stages, which chronologically precede the “late” emergence of the Ukrainian language traditionally asserted in certain historiographical concepts. This, in turn, refutes the notion of its secondary character or dependence on other East Slavic languages.

The analysis of the works of Konstantyn Tyshchenko and Hryhorii Pivtorak confirms that the Ukrainian linguistic system has preserved a substantial layer of archaic Proto-Slavic features, while also undergoing influences from various ethno-linguistic contacts (Scythian, Celtic, Gothic, and Latin), which testifies to its antiquity, openness, and complexity of formation. The totality of phonetic, morphological, and word-formational features inherent in the Ukrainian language cannot be explained as the result of a late divergence from a hypothetical «Old Russian» language; rather, they indicate an independent development within the broader Slavic area.

Particularly significant is the analysis of epigraphic sources, notably the graffiti of Saint Sophia Cathedral, studied by Serhii Vysotskyi. These inscriptions of the 11th–12th centuries constitute unique evidence of the functioning of a living vernacular language under conditions of the dominance of the Church Slavonic written tradition. Their linguistic structure contains features that directly correlate with modern Ukrainian, both at the lexical and grammatical levels. This allows us to assert that the Ukrainian linguistic tradition existed not merely as a potential or latent system, but as a real communicative practice of broad social strata of the population of Kyivan Rus.

The subsequent stage in the development of the Ukrainian language is associated with the functioning of chancery and administrative practice within

the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where the Ruthenian language acquired official status. The use of this language in legal acts, particularly in the Lithuanian Statutes, attests to its high level of functional development and its capacity for standardization. At the same time, the chancery language maintained a close connection with its vernacular basis, which ensured its intelligibility and vitality.

Thus, the development of the Ukrainian language should be regarded as a process of gradual crystallization of supradialectal norms on the basis of living popular speech, which not only preserved its continuity but also actively influenced the formation of the written tradition. The popular character of the Ukrainian language is manifested in its flexibility, openness to external influences, and capacity to integrate heterogeneous elements into a coherent system.

In summary, it can be asserted that the Ukrainian language is an autochthonous and self-sufficient phenomenon, the historical development of which has remained uninterrupted from the earliest times to the present. Its formation took place in close connection with ethnocultural processes on the territory of Rus, while the vernacular basis played a decisive role in ensuring this continuity. Consequently, contemporary scholarly data convincingly refute pseudoscientific concepts regarding the secondary or artificial nature of the Ukrainian language and confirm its organic place among the Slavic languages as a distinct, historically formed linguistic system.

SUMMARY

The study examines the problem of the origin, continuity of development, and the vernacular character of the Ukrainian language as a linguistic system formed within the milieu of Rus, taking into account contemporary scholarly approaches and the critique of pseudoscientific concepts. On the basis of the periodization proposed by Yurii Shevelov, the early differentiation of the Ukrainian language and its independent evolution from the Proto-Slavic foundation are substantiated. The study incorporates linguistic arguments presented in the works of Konstantyn Tyshchenko and Hryhorii Pivtorak, which confirm the presence of archaic features and a complex system of interlinguistic contacts in the process of the formation of the Ukrainian language. Particular attention is devoted to the analysis of epigraphic sources, notably the graffiti of Saint Sophia Cathedral, which attest to the functioning of a living vernacular language already in the 11th–12th centuries. It is demonstrated that these monuments reflect not a книжна, but an everyday linguistic practice directly connected with modern Ukrainian. The role of chancery and administrative language during the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is also examined, where the Ruthenian language acquired official status and underwent partial

standardization. It is shown that the interaction between written and spoken forms contributed to the formation of supradialectal norms. As a result of the study, it is demonstrated that the Ukrainian language is an autochthonous, historically continuous, and self-sufficient linguistic system. The findings refute notions of its late or artificial origin and confirm its decisive role in the cultural and historical development of the Ukrainian people.

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Information about the author:

Deshko Petro Petrovych,

Master of Arts in History and Law,

Head of Academic Affairs

Augustyn Voloshyn Carpathian University

4, Yu. Hoidy Street, Uzhhorod, Ukraine