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Ukrainian Onomastic Identity Across 15 Years (2006–2021)

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Abstract

Proper names habitually express the cultural and social characteristics of a group; therefore, they express collective confirmation of a sense of self-image, affiliations, and emotional anchors. The goal of this investigation is to help deepen our understanding of the onomastic identity revealed in the collective discourse and manifested through the memetic features of onyms. The research presented here consolidated onomastics, psycholinguistics, memetics, and cultural studies. The focus of this investigation is on the changing collective onomastic identity in the Ukrainian society. The data for this research was gathered from two free associative experiments carried out with Ukrainian respondents in 2006 and 2021. In both years, respondents were presented with identical lists of stimuli. Both corpora reveal proper names with memetic features that were preserved in collective memory.

Keywords: free association, identity, Ukraine, psycholinguistics, memetics, cultural studies

Introduction: Personal, Collective, and Onomastic Identity[1]

In broad terms, identity can be described as self-definition by groups or individuals (Edwards 2009, 258). Following this definition, identity can be constructed through different features based on local attribution, ethnical belonging, religious beliefs, or position in social strata. Therefore, identity is closely connected with the notion of "group". Tajfel and Turner (1986) define a group in the following manner:

> as a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, who share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it (15).

Using this definition, people who comprise the group produce identity traits and simultaneously evaluate and measure them to shape the core aspects of sameness. Ting-Toomey (2009) places cultural, social, relational, and individual images of self-conception at the core of identity. From this perspective, the individual identity is always in a state of production, evaluation, re-evaluation, and assessment. Thus, identity is "always in production, an outcome of agentive moves rather than a given" (Bauman 2000, 1). Heterogeneous and dynamic, identity "is constantly interactively constructed on a microlevel, where an individual's identity is claimed, contested and re-constructed in interaction and in relation to the other participants" (Norris 2007, 657). It is continuously constructed by participants of the social interactional and discourse.

The main foci of the present onomastic study are personal identity, collective identity, and cultural identity. Collective identity preserves history and common experience in a concise form represented by memetic structures. Simultaneously, collective identity reproduces the present through social discourse. As Ochs asserts, "every social interaction in this sense has the potential for both cultural persistence and change, and past and future are manifest in the interactional present" (1996, 416). At the same time, collective identity is closely related to personal identity.

As Postmes and Baym (2005) argue, this closeness is due in large measure to shared based on consensus. The confluences of the personal and the collective identity produce the ethnic onomastic landscape, which continuously makes and unmakes groups (Bourdieu 1991, 221). Against this theoretical background, proper names may be seen as multilayered concepts which perpetually process recurring and new information. The proper names within each respective culture are composed of clusters of compressed information that allows for a collective confirmation of identity through mutual usage and contextual understanding.

From this perspective, both personal identity and collective (group) identity are tied to "cultural identity". Proper names, as intracultural universals, may be considered one of these cultural values that convey information about a community which is then stored in the collective memory. Likewise, proper names exist in the social space, the latter being broadly defined as a "symbolic space, perceived and mentally processed by a particular group, and the creation of such an understood social space is a prerequisite for successfully realizing the activities which are important to that group" (Rutkowski 2000, 115). Within that social space, proper names may acquire memetic features (for example, popularity, transition to the following generations, high velocity of spreading, and connotative meaning). Onyms may demarcate national unity and become memeplexes distributed to other cultures and subsequent generations.

Onomastic identity is therefore also related to personal, cultural (group) identity to the extent that the onomastic repertoire of individuals in a group is strongly influenced by both personal and collective experience in the informational landscape (Krogseth 2012; Joseph 2006). Accordingly, there are some onyms that are present in most individual registers. Krško and Záborská (2018) therefore advocate the notion of onomastic register as "dynamic where [a] proper name may move to the center of periphery. Everyone's anthroponymic register has a different extent, influenced by their personality, their job, as well as the place where they live" (191). Collective identity, then, is perceived as the individual's identification with the community. The phenomenon of names and naming may also be perceived as an identity-building collective identification. As Krogseth (2012) explains:

> Our name is an identity badge or an identity marker which helps us—for ourselves and by others—to be identified as the same person, as identical. It also fills an important double function of being both individual and collective, unique (at least relatively so) and founded in community (164).

A social group creates inventories of proper names, naturally selecting them from the current onomastic landscape. This choice defines the cultural dimensions of a group and defines its ethnic systems. Proper names as cultural units may spread throughout a group, functioning as the means of transmitting information and forming identity features. In this way, "[n]aming is a powerful vehicle for promoting identification with the past and locating oneself within networks of memory" (Alderman 2008, 195). In summary, onomastic identity, being a specific badge of belonging (Schlüter 1994; Aksholakova 2014), is based on the onomastic repertoire deployed by a social group with the knowledge of a shared understanding of the underlying context, founded on personal and group cultural identity. Onomastics investigations may provide many valuable accounts of the connection between identity and proper names.

To date, there has been comparatively little published information on how Ukrainian identity is mirrored in proper names. To our best knowledge, no previous onomastic study has investigated Ukrainian identity diachronically over such a large period of time. The experimental investigation of proper names presented here therefore provides one of the first insights into Ukrainian onomastic identity. More specifically, this study explored Ukrainian collective onomastic identity in relation to the toponym *Ukraine*.

The methodological approach of this study is rooted in neuropsychology. Explained briefly, investigations into cognition have demonstrated that proper names are processed significantly faster than common nouns which suggests that the retrieval pathways of proper names and common nouns differ (Sjoblom 2021; Wang et al. 2016; Müller 2010; Proverbio et al. 2009; Karpenko 2006; Semenza 2006; Yen 2006). Moreover, according to Pamp (1985), "most items in our mental lexica get their semantic contents from our experiences of the referents" (117). Experience gathered from the surrounding cultural background, including all visual and sensory information, is mirrored in significant memetic onyms. We therefore interpret proper names as a means of expressing onomastic, cultural, and individual identity through contextualization cues. As described in the following segment, by using a free association experiment and the toponymic keyword *Ukraine*, we sought to access synchronic and diachronic patterns in respondents' identity.

Methodology

The experiments were held in 2006 and in 2021, with 100 students of the Odesa Mechnikov National University. During the investigation, the stimuli used to elicit free associations contained 30 onyms. However, for this article, we concentrate on only one: *Ukraine*. The two sets of data generated for 2006 and 2021 were examined within the paradigm of cognitive analysis. The replicated experimental procedure involved the following steps. The informants were first given questionnaires with the stimuli list. They were then asked to write the first word or word combination that came to their mind. The total number of different reactions for the two time periods investigated was comparable: 57 in 2006, and 52 in 2021. The same was true of the repertoire of the onymic reactions; they numbered 10 and 8, respectively. The respondents' association were then analyzed and divided into several semantic clusters: LOCATION, PEOPLE, EMOTION, ARTEFACT. The LOCATION cluster was further sub-divided into two groups: (1) "macrolocation" which includes geographical notions such as country, territory, city, state, or continent; and (2) "microlocation" which constitutes smaller locations such as, for instance, street, building, or park. The category EMOTION consists of feelings and moods which were strongly connected with the stimulus. Importantly, there was considerable overlap between EMOTION and other semantic groups, especially LOCATION. The PEOPLE category contains items that mention individuals or groups whose habitat or professional activity was closely connected with the stimulus. Finally, the semantic cluster ARTEFACT comprises objects often human-made, and typically of cultural or historical interest. The following segment presents the results of the comparative analysis of the distribution of the semantic groups across the two time periods examined.

Results[2]

Part 1: The Findings from 2006

Overall, the percentage of respondent reactions that fell into the four semantic categories were distributed as follows: LOCATION (55.33%); EMOTION 44.66%; PEOPLE (16.50%) and ARTEFACTS (16.50%). However, as will be shown in the next sections, there was frequent overlap between the categories in that some of the responses given were semantically interwoven with each other. This explains why the percentages given above exceed a total of 100%.

LOCATION

Of all the reactions given to the stimulus *Ukraine* in 2006 experiment, the most frequent fell into the category LOCATION. This finding is rather predictable, given the fact that the stimulus was a toponym. Among those reactions obtained, the following responses had the highest frequency of four or higher: *Батьківщина* 'motherland' (17); *країна* 'country' (9); *держава* 'state' (4); *моя країна* 'my country' (4). Responses with a frequency of three include *наша країна* 'our country'; *гарна країна* 'beautiful country'; *рідна земля* 'native soil'; and *поля* 'fields'. And responses that were mentioned twice were *земля* 'land'; *край* 'region'; *держава нині незалежна (офіційно)* 'the state is now independent (officially)', and *дім* 'home'. As these findings shows, the reactions could be further differentiated into two subgroups: macrolocations (for example, *країна* 'country' and *держава* 'state') and microlocations (for example, *дім* 'home' and *поля* 'fields'). While 11.65% of the 57 responses falling into the category LOCATION were microlocations, 43.69% of the 57 responses were macrolocations.

Some reactions mentioned for LOCATION clearly have a distinct emotive quality, responses like *моя країна* 'my country'; *наша країна* 'our country'; *гарна країна* 'beautiful country'; *рідна земля* 'native soil'. The use of the 1st person possessive pronouns "my" and "our" as well as the emotionally-laden adjectives "beautiful" and "native" have a high degree of affectivity. While most of the emotive reactions gathered were positive, there was one exception: *наша хата скраю—нічого не знаю* 'our house is on the border—I don't know anything'. This response requires further explanation. The idiomatic phrase "наша хата скраю" can be translated as "it's none of my business". Historically, this idiom came from a time in which all important events happened at the center of a town or village. As a result, the people who lived on the outskirts received local news considerably late and were, as a consequence, not well integrated into urban social life (Zabiiaka and Zabiiaka 2015). In the current context, the use of this idiom by the respondent might indicate an unwillingness to be involved in something due to their indifference.

Seen as a group, these responses demonstrate that the toponymic stimuli *Ukraine* carried more than a locative meaning for the study participants. In one instance, a respondent's response carried both both positive and negative emotions: *гарні люди але погана держава* 'beautiful people but a bad state'. Here, the juxtaposition reveals the informant's strong and conflicted emotional reaction to the stimulus. What is also interesting about this example is the fact that it conjoins two semantic categories LOCATION and PEOPLE. Of all the reactions gathered in response to the stimuli *Ukraine,* this cross-over accounted for 16.50% (17).

PEOPLE

Within this category, a variety of responses were given. For example, in reaction to the toponym *Ukraine*, two respondents said *Кучма/Kuchma,* the surname of the second president of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005), while two other study participants said *Руслана Писанка/Ruslana Pysanka,* a popular Ukrainian actress and cinematographer, who was long considered to be the ideal of a beautiful Ukrainian woman. More than twice as common as these two responses were the kinship terms *мати* 'mother' (4); *ненька* 'mama' (4); *рідна мати* 'dearest mother'(1); and *мама* 'mom'(1). The frequency of these free associations is to be expected as kinship terms are traditionally used as "folk poetic embodiment of the native land, Motherland, Ukraine" (Zhaivoronok 2006). Included in this group was the response *Україна-ненька* 'Ukraine-mama'. As Stepanenko (2020) explains, such terminology embodies the "eternal love of our people for their country, disclosure of sacredness as one of the most important of Ukrainian worldview essences" (56).

By far, the most commonly given reaction to *Ukraine* was *Батьківщина* 'homeland' (17). Technically speaking, the literal translation of *Батьківщина* is 'parentland' because this term is derived from the lexeme *батьки* meaning 'parents' (Hrynchenko 1907); and *батьки* is derived from *батько* which means 'father'. Therefore, the association *Батьківщина* may also be translated as 'fatherland'.

While the incidence of familial associations was comparatively high, the toponym *Ukraine* only elicited one single ethnonym, *Козак* 'Cossack'. Historically, the Cossacks were a martial society in Ukraine's southern steppe frontier (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2023). Starting in the 15th century, the Cossacks established a

military encampment in the territory of the Dnieper River, which was described as being just "beyond the rapids" or *za porohy → Zaporozhia → Zaporizhzhia*. Over time, the Cossacks have become the heroic subjects of numerous artistic works. For example, they may be seen in Ilya Repin's famous painting "Zaporozhians write a letter to the Turkish Sultan" (1891). According to Coates (2021), ethnonyms are names given to groups of people who shares a material, artistic, or spiritual culture. The respondent's free association between *Ukraine* and *Cossack* might indicate a cognitive tie between the heroism of the Ukrainian present and past.

EMOTIONS

The category EMOTIONS contained a great diversity of reactions. Examples with a frequency of one include *Моя* 'mine'; *люблю* 'love'; *рідна* 'native'; *вільна* 'free'; *єдина* 'united'; *істина* 'truth'; *відсталість* 'backwardness'; *тепло* 'warmth'; and *ласка* 'tenderness'. Slightly more common responses *моя країна*, 'my country' which was mentioned by two respondents. Here again, the use of the 1st person possessive pronouns reflects the respondents' affectivity. Emotion was also expressed in the responses *мати* 'mother' and *ненька* 'mama' which were each given by four respondents. A variant of this last set was *рідна мати*. This phrase is made up of the kinship term *мати* or 'mother' which is modified by the adjective *рідна*, meaning 'native and dearest'. It is widely accepted in Ukrainian culture to refer to the nation as "motherland" (Zhaivoronok 2006). Numerous examples of this usage can be found in Ukrainian poems, songs, and artistic prose (for example, "Our mama Ukraine" by Dmytro Gontar and "We have only one Ukrainian mama" by Nadiya Krasotkina).

ARTEFACTS

The final semantic group of reactions was mainly symbolic in character. Spontaneous single responses that fell into this category include the following: *хліб* 'bread'; *пшениця* 'wheat' (Ukraine is one of the world's top grain exporters); *вареники* 'dumplings' (a popular Ukrainian dish); *герб* 'coat of arms'; *гімн* 'anthem'; *прапор* 'flag'; *жовто-блакитний прапор* 'yellow-blue flag' (the colors of the Ukrainian flag symbolize a blue sky over a yellow wheat field); and *народні костюми* 'folk costumes'. Another more common response was *калина* 'guelder rose', a symbol of beauty and femininity in Ukraine. This association which was mentioned by two study participants. Also mentioned comparatively often was *пісні/пісня* 'song(s)' which had a frequency of four. As these results show, the toponym *Ukraine* was associated with aspects of the nation's cultural legacy.

While most of the above responses are fairly transparent, one response in this category might need added explanation. The phrase *не вмерла* 'not dead' is from the national anthem of Ukraine.[3] Composed between 1863 and 1865 by Pavlo Chubynsky and Mychaylo Verbitsky, it was officially adopted in 2003. The beginning of the anthem is as follows: "Ще не вмерла України і слава, і воля", which translated into English means "Ukraine's glory and will are not dead".

Part 2: The Findings from 2021

From the experiment held in 2021, the same semantic groups from 2006 were detected again. However, as shown in the table below, the distribution was somewhat different.

Table 1: Distribution of Free Associations with *Ukraine* by Frequency and Percentage for 2006 and 2021

	Respondents' Free Associations			
	2006		2021	
Semantic Category	Freq	%	Freq	%
LOCATION		55.33		43.27
EMOTION		44.66		41.35
PEOPLE		16.50		6.73
ARTEFACTS		16.50		28.85

As can be seen in table 1, each of the semantic categories demonstrated a decrease in percentage. The only exception to this trend was ARTEFACTS, which increased. The following sections give detailed information about the findings gathered in 2021 for each of these semantic categories.

LOCATION

Included among the reactions that fell into this category were macrolocations like *Батьківщина* 'motherland'; (14); *країна* 'country' (12); *країна наша* 'our country'; *моя країна* 'my country'; *Європа* 'Europe'; *центр Європи* 'centre of Europe'; *Одеса* 'Odesa' (a major city on the Black Sea coast with a population of more than one million)*; Дніпро* 'Dnipro', the name of one of the largest, most well-known rivers in Ukraine, many

locations and products in Ukraine incorporate this popular hydronym (for example, an underground subway station in Kyiv, a football club, and a brand of butter cookies). Other responses in this category were microlocations (for example., *дім* 'home' (5); *поле/поля* 'field(s)' (5); and *степ* 'steppe' (3). As found before in 2001, some of the reactions in this category also make use of the 1st person possessive pronouns (for example, *країна наша* 'our country'; and *моя країна* 'my country'), potentially underlining personal attitude towards the stimulus.

Interestingly, the toponym *Russia* which was present in the 2006 experiment did not appear among the reactions given to *Ukraine* in 2021. It is likely that, after the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014, the mental association between these two countries was deleted. Instead, the participants associated *Європа* 'Europe' and *центр Європи* 'centre of Europe'. This contrasting result may signify a cognitive change in the Ukrainian population in which their nation has a new geopolitical focus.

PEOPLE

The armed conflict which emerged before the 2021 experiment may also explain the appearance of other associations which was absent from the 2006 data: *ми* 'we'; *українці* 'Ukrainians'; and *патріот* 'patriot'. Aside from these new responses, this category also contained reactions that had been seen in the 2006 data-set (for example, *сім'я* 'family' (1); *ненька* 'mama' (1); and *мати* 'mother' (2).

EMOTION

Some of the reactions in this semantic classification that had a frequency higher than two were Батьківщина 'motherland' (14); *воля* 'will' (4); *мати* 'mother' (2), and *любов* 'love' (2). Included among those responses with a frequency of one were *велика* 'great'; *незалежна* 'independent'; *сум* 'sadness; *тепло* 'warmth'; *боротьба* 'struggle'; *злидні* 'poverty'; *праця* 'work; *історія* 'history', *має потенціал* 'has potential'; *набридло* 'fed up'; *країна наша* 'our country'; *моя країна* 'my country'; and *понад усе* 'above all'. The last response in this listing probably requires explanation for a non-Ukrainian readership. This phrase is a Ukrainian patriotic slogan: a call to fight for the independence of Ukraine. It originated in 1918. During the Revolution of Dignity, also known as the Maidan Revolution, this call has become widely used amongst Ukrainians in favor of the country following a European Union-oriented political alliance instead of a pro-Russian one.

ARTEFACTS

Participant reactions counted among this group include *прапор* 'flag' (6); *мапа* 'map' (4); *синьо-жовтий прапор* 'blue and yellow flag' (2); the traditional beetroot soup with meat and vegetables called *борщ* or 'borscht' (2); *калина* 'guelder rose' (1); *зерно* 'grain' (1); *жито або пшениця* 'rye or wheat' (1); and *колоски* 'ears of corn' (1). Two other reactions included in this semantic category were iconic features of Ukrainian folkwear. The first is the name of the traditional hand embroidered shirt called a *вишиванка* or 'vyshyvanka'. This garment was mentioned by two separate respondents. The second element of traditional Ukrainian dress mentioned by a single study participant was the name for the wreath of flowers worn by Ukrainian women, the *вінок*. Another association made with Ukraine that requires additional explanation is *соловей* 'nightingale' (1). Ukrainians commonly describe their language as being like the song of a nightingale, *солов'їна мова*. As a group, the associations in this semantic category represent many of the "key invariant characters-symbols" of the nation which make up "an important component of Ukrainian national view of the world"; and are widely "associated strong emotions: joy, love, sadness, grief, despair and others" (Syvachuk 2021, 195). As such, the concepts reflected in these associations may be seen as a part of the historical human capital of Ukrainian culture (Holla & Kuipers 2015); hallmarks of Ukrainian individual, cultural, and onomastic identity.

Summary and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to examine the Ukrainian onomastic identity. To achieve this goal, we conducted two free associative experiments with the toponymic stimuli *Ukraine*. The relative consistency of the respondents' associations revealed a strong shared understanding of the Ukrainian nation. For the study participants, the name *Ukraine* does not just evoke a topographical location on a map, but rather it evokes emotionally laden symbols of cultural and historical heritage. The strength and intimacy of the respondents' connection to this cultural inheritance is epitomized by the repetition of the kinship term "mother" and its various synonyms. The frequency of these responses, both within and across both time periods explored, reveals the positive attitude the informants had towards their country. For them, the ideas of "mother" and

"motherland" are connected and cherished. Based on these findings, one can infer that the attitude the Ukrainian participants had towards their country was akin to that which children have towards their parents. Accordingly, the nation of Ukraine was found to be an integral component of their individual and collective onomastic identity. There are several possible avenues for future research. For example, more and different names could be used as stimuli in similar free association investigations to provide a fuller picture of the Ukrainian onomastic identity. Similarly, research using the same methodology in different countries could also increase our understanding of the ways in which proper names function within and across differing cultural landscapes and societies. It is hoped that the findings of this investigation make a contribution to this important area of onomastic scholarship.

Notes

[1] It should be noted that socio-onomastic studies prefer to use either the term "onomastic identity "(Aldrin 2019; Schlüter 1994; Selfa 2014) or "onymic identity" (Brendler 2012; Odaloš 2019). In the present investigation, preference is given to the former.

[2] For a complete listing of the responses, please contact the primary author.

[3] For more about Ukraine's national anthem, see https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/602-IV#Text.

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